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*JACK CLEMO:*  
*CARTOGRAPHER OF GRACE*

A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY  
STEPHEN JOHN LANE

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This paper  
is dedicated to  
Jack and Ruth Clemo  
Jane and George Wallace  
and my wife Sandra.  
Without their help and encouragement  
it would not have been written.

## ABSTRACT

*JACK CLEMO: CARTOGRAPHER OF GRACE* is an interpretative study of the novels and poetry of Jack Clemo. Chapter One traces, through published biographical material, the main personal influences upon the development of his vision. Chapters Two to Four show how ideas which first found publication in his published poetry only after 1951 had developed over a period of twenty years. The material for these chapters (mainly unpublished novels and juvenile poetry) was kindly loaned to the author by Mr Clemo. The published novels and first collection of verses are studied in the four following chapters, where it becomes clear that Clemo's initial, distinctive Calvinist view of life shows striking similarities with the neo-orthodox writings of Karl Barth (whom he had not then read) and the post-Barthian Jurgen Moltmann (whom Clemo has never read). These chapters offer an interpretation of Clemo's Calvinist vision and show it to be both theologically sound and, in terms of literature, unique. Clemo's contribution, it is seen, is in terms of his metaphoric use of landscape in a sustained refutation of the case for a natural theology; this, and his personal adaptation of the idea of election inspired by his admiration for Robert Browning. Substantial changes of poetic technique appear in the collection *Cactus on Carmel*, and these, and their sources, are accounted for in Chapter Nine. Chapters Ten to Twelve trace the development of Clemo's poetry away from its pre-occupation with the landscape of South-East Cornwall, the expansion of genre to include portraiture and dramatic monologue, and account for these developments in terms of Clemo's life-long determination to marry. This determination is seen to be the most important influence upon Clemo's life, shaping all the work he has produced. Chapter Thirteen examines the poetry in which Clemo challenges head on the materialism of the century. The final chapter is a detailed study of the worksheets of poems Clemo wrote over some twenty five years, and thus compares the processes of production adopted after the poet became blind with those employed earlier.

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## NOTES

1. The following abbreviated titles of three of Clemo's books are employed throughout this paper:  
*Confession*: for *Confession of a Rebel*  
*Gospel*: for *The Invading Gospel*  
*Marriage*: for *The Marriage of a Rebel*
2. Some of the material used here appeared in reduced form in:  
'A Reading of the Manuscripts of Jack Clemo', *PN Review*, no.22, 1981;  
and, 'Jack Clemo', in *Poets of Great Britain and Ireland, 1945-1960: Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Vincent B. Sherry, Jr., Detroit, 1984.

to all his surviving manuscript and typescript material. This included unpublished juvenile poetry, manuscript and typescript novels and the draft sheets of almost his entire poetic output since 1945. Access to this material enormously enriched my understanding of the writer's work, and has played an important part in the interpretation which follows.

Between the years 1951-1954 Clemo's poor and troubled sight deteriorated. He has remained blind ever since. One effect of this, in terms of literary output, was the abandonment of the novel. *The Shadowed Bed*, published in 1986, was originally written in the 1930s. Following the onset of blindness Clemo was forced to concentrate all his creative efforts into poetry, a form he had previously considered merely a side-line, and to develop a new means of composition. He has never used a Braille typewriter. Comparison of the draft sheets of poems written before and after 1954 offer, in addition to their testament to Jack Clemo's courage, a fascinating insight into his creative methods. This is the subject of Chapter Fourteen.

The aim of this paper is interpretation. Before the significance of a writer can be explored, before his relationship with his peers, his place in contemporary movements, evaluated, it is necessary to understand as clearly as one can what the writer is saying, and why saying it is important to him. Such a belief has somewhat fallen out of favour. Ever since W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley attacked what they called 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1) numerous literary theories have emerged, each determined to diminish the importance of the author in an understanding of his work. What unites approaches as different as New Criticism, Marxism, Structuralism, Discourse Theory and Deconstruction is the maxim that the author of a text is not the author of its meaning. The present paper is at odds with such a position. Underlying it is the belief that the primary meaning of a text belongs with the author and that this meaning is recoverable. Such a view does not deny the value of alternative meanings,

i, *Sewanee Review*, no. 54, 1946. This essay was reprinted in Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon; Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, London, 1970.



## PREFACE

Jack Clemo has publised poetry and prose for forty years. He has issued seven collections of verse, two novels, two volumes of autobiography and a 'Christian manifesto'. He has received the Atlantic Award for Literature from Birmingham University, an honorary D. Litt. from Exeter University, been crowned *Prdyth an Fry* at the Cornish Gorsedd Festival. In addition he is in receipt of a Civil List Pension in recognition of his contribution to literature. Despite such formal recognition, poems by him are rarely anthologized, his books are largely absent from University library shelves, and his work has not yet been the subject of a sustained critical enquiry. Of the two books which do include brief accounts of his poetry, one is now out of print, and both only deal with his first major collection of poetry, *The Map of Clay*. The present paper attempts to correct this situation.

The two critical evaluations which do exist are inadequate both in regard to the volumes published after 1961, and in terms of the analysis offered because of the unavailability at the time of their going to press of material made use of here. Clemo's work is intimately connected with events within his life and his conception of Christianity, sin, marriage and creativity. An attempt to understand his work which did not at the same time thoroughly investigate these issues could not do justice to the complexity and originality of Clemo's work.

The present paper draws heavily upon Clemo's autobiographical volumes and shorter papers. Clemo has said in the Preface to his first volume of autobiography that he is 'one of those writers whose creative work cannot be fully understood without reference to certain broken boundaries in their private lives'. My own attempt to understand Clemo's work has confirmed this. A recapitulation of Clemo's life which emphasizes the seminal points came to seem both necessary and a courtesy to the reader as so much hinges upon familiarity with the life.

While engaged upon my research Jack Clemo generously gave me access



to all his surviving manuscript and typescript material. This included unpublished juvenile poetry, manuscript and typescript novels and the draft sheets of almost his entire poetic output since 1945. Access to this material enormously enriched my understanding of the writer's work, and has played an important part in the interpretation which follows.

Between the years 1951-1954 Clemo's poor and troubled sight deteriorated. He has remained blind ever since. One effect of this, in terms of literary output, was the abandonment of the novel. *The Shadowed Bed*, published in 1986, was originally written in the 1930s. Following the onset of blindness Clemo was forced to concentrate all his creative efforts into poetry, a form he had previously considered merely a side-line, and to develop a new means of composition. He has never used a Braille typewriter. Comparison of the draft sheets of poems written before and after 1954 offer, in addition to their testament to Jack Clemo's courage, a fascinating insight into his creative methods. This is the subject of Chapter Fourteen.

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1, *Sewanee Review*, no. 54, 1946. This essay was reprinted in Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon; Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, London, 1970.

which, following E.D.Hirsch, I shall deem significances, (1) but holds that interpretation in terms of authorial intention is anterior.

The present paper, then, is concerned to establish what Jack Clemo has to say and his reasons for saying it, both conscious and unconscious. In addition to his published work and unpublished papers, theological and anthropological secondary sources have been employed where these seem to help clarify Clemo's intention. The attempt to interpret texts in terms of authorial intention is beset with problems and can never be considered complete. Without it, I believe, there is no communication.

1. E.D.Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation*, London, 1967.

JACK CLEMO:  
CARTOGRAPHER OF GRACE

by  
Stephen John Lane



## CHAPTER ONE

### GENESIS

The central tensions in Jack Clemo's life were there before his birth, in the marriages of his parents and grandparents. His mother, Eveline Polmounter, was the product of the marriage of a good-humoured illiterate smallholder, over-fond of drink, and Jane Bullen, daughter of a tin-mine labourer. The Bullens were devout Methodists. John had no interest in religion and Jane employed every means a young wife could to win him to her beliefs. So successful was she, according to Clemo's account, that within a few months John 'had been broken down...' and he 'was kneeling beside her, experiencing conversion' (*Confession*, p.9).<sup>(1)</sup> Shortly after, he rejected tobacco and drink, concentrated on family life and became a lay preacher.

Jane Polmounter bore twelve children, six of whom survived, and raised them at Goonvean farm. They were desperately poor and remarkably happy. John Polmounter died two years after his youngest and favourite daughter married Reginald Clemo, a second generation St Austellian whose family arrived from the Newquay area sometime in the early eighteen eighties. Reginald Clemo's father shared John Polmounter's love of drink, an appetite he passed on to his son, but it affected the Clemos differently, inducing black moods and violence. Esther Clemo (Reginald's mother) often had to protect their eight children from her husband's drunken assaults.

Eveline Polmounter seemed to be repeating her mother's pattern when she married Reginald. Perhaps she believed she too could work the bedside wonders her mother had worked upon John Polmounter. Certainly Reginald Clemo had no interest in religion, although a fine singing voice and a need to escape the violence of home had led him to join the Trethosa village chapel choir. Reginald nurtured dreams of improving himself and emigrated to America with the intention of returning in a few years with at least a respectable sum saved and the possibility of starting married life with

1, Unless otherwise indicated page references in the text refer to *Confession*.



Eveline Polmounter in surroundings better than either had known until then. His hopes were dashed. Reginald returned no richer and deeply undermined in confidence. 'Suddenly, inexplicably as it seemed to him, he was only the equal of his father.' (p4) Marriage to Eveline at least offered him the prospect of escaping the tiny labourer's cottage, the rows, the violence. And it appears, from Jack Clemo's less than favourable account of his father, that the man genuinely loved his wife.

Marriage gave Reginald a sense of purpose, and a breathing space. Clemo has commented that, surrounded as it was by blastings, quarries and railway cuttings, the Polmounter farm was 'an oasis of beauty and fertility'. (p.4) But the marriage was not to be a happy one. Their first child, a girl, died within weeks of its birth. The following year John Polmounter died and the newly weds and Eveline's chronically deformed sister, Bertha, were forced to move into a cottage almost identical to the one Reginald had escaped from through marriage. By this time Eveline was pregnant again and the Clemos and Bertha and Mrs Polmounter and, a few months later, their baby son, had to cope with life in a four roomed cottage that lacked drainage, water, and, of course, electricity.

The marriage was short-lived: Reginald Clemo died in action shortly before Christmas 1917. And, as I have said, it was unhappy. The source of this unhappiness is darkly hinted at several times in Clemo's first volume of autobiography. His writing exhibits a reluctance to speak openly, a squeamishness renders opaque what ought to be clear as, according to Clemo's own words, a proper understanding of its author depends upon knowledge of his father. (p.16) He equates his childhood with that of D.H. Lawrence and speaks of a war between 'brutality and refinement', hints at a streak of moral cowardice that prevented Reginald Clemo from volunteering for active duty service ('patriotism is a meaningless term to men of his type'), and describes the man's finer feelings as 'a curious undercurrent of sensitiveness' as though to devalue the very moving account of Reginald Clemo's devotion to wife and child that follows this proviso, (pp.18-19). He hints at the capacity to 'kill his best friend', repeats stories of the man's inability to show affection, deems him 'callous and cruel' and speaks of the man's 'sexual disharmony' which



brought constant distress to Mrs Clemo. Despite this, Reginald Clemo is said to have undergone the beginnings of a moral transformation under his wife and her parents, and learnt 'humility and loyalty' and attended chapel regularly. (p.20)

This oblique approach to his father's life reappears later on in Clemo's account. (pp 90 and 91) We are told of 'ugly secrets' that remain unrevealed, are warned there were 'tragic disharmonies' that were traceable through the Clemo blood-line; a dark, sensual, even sadistic line in stark contrast with the humility, restraint and kindness of the Polmounters. The autobiographer understands himself as the product of these opposed influences. This is something we shall have occasion to refer to again.

The infant grew healthy and precocious. At eighteen months he could recite the Lord's Prayer without fault. At four he was capable of reading the newspaper. He became a child to be shown off to neighbours and friends. For a while the child's precocity encouraged Eveline Clemo in the hope that the young boy would grow able to follow in John Polmounter's footsteps and become an evangelist. But then, a few days before his fifth birthday, he complained of pains in the eyes. To his mother's horror she saw that a film had begun to grow across the right eye. It was the initial assault of iritis, a disease which was to plague him until it eventually left him, as a man, totally blind.

Eveline Clemo broke. Life, since her marriage in 1913, had been a series of tragedies - marital 'disharmonies', the death of her first born, her father, her husband and her mother, and now blindness in her surviving child - all this within a space of five years. In the words of her own account, she felt she 'could not face life with a blind child and with no husband to help carry the burden'.<sup>(1)</sup> She turned to the one immutable source of comfort she knew, the Bible. Opening it at random she received a revelation:

Opening my Bible, and casting my eyes on the page  
the first words I read were 'Fear not' - these two words gripped

1, Eveline Clemo, *I Proved Thee at the Waters*, Ilkeston, [1976], p.3.

me, and as I continued to read, I received an unforgettable promise;

'Thou shalt not be ashamed; neither be thou confounded;  
for thou shalt not be put to shame, for thou shalt forget  
the shame of thy youth and shalt not remember the reproach  
of thy widowhood any more. For Thy Maker is thine husband;  
the Lord of hosts is his name, and thy redeemer the holy  
one of Israel. For the Lord hath called thee as a woman  
forsaken and grieved in spirit and a wife of youth, when  
thou was refused, saith thy God. For a small moment have  
I forsaken thee; but with great mercies shall I gather  
thee...and all thy children shall be taught of the Lord,  
and great shall be the peace of thy children.'(1)

In the depth of her misery she felt God had spoken to her directly, knew of her suffering, her marriage, her fears for her child. The suffering was punishment: its cause, her marriage. 'I saw clearly my mistake in disobeying God's word: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers"'.(2) But beyond punishment lay forgiveness, and a promise for her son. It gave her immediate strength and permanent purpose. From that time on her

one desire was to sacrifice my own pleasure in life that  
I might surround my child with this suffering love, praying  
that he would be kept safe from yielding to the great evils  
in life and so bring honour to the God Who was waiting to  
honour him if he obeyed His Word.(3)

1. *ibid* p.10. The reference is to Isaiah, 54:4ff. 2. *ibid*, p.10. Clemo passes a similar judgment on Jane Bullen for her marriage to John Polmounter who, at the time of their marriage, was not a practising Christian; see *Confession*, p.9. 3. Eveline Clemo, pp.9-10. Clemo and his mother differ on the dating of this episode. Clemo places it immediately after his father's death, see *Confession*, p.21.



For almost a year Clemo suffered blindness and terrible pain: the slightest light was more than he could bear. He endured seemingly endless months swathed in bandages and cast in utter darkness. It traumatised him.

Before the blindness came I was a plump, jolly, pink-faced little fellow, very lively, chattering and laughing all day long. Those few months of isolation, with the mental nightmare of inarticulate terrors and panics...had changed me into a thin pasty-faced brat, dull-eyed, silent and morbid, (p.28)

School, after such an ordeal, proved too great an adjustment. He made no friends, refused to play with the other boys (which earned him the girlish nickname Jean), and showed indifference to every aspect of schooling except for English and Religious Education. Perhaps today his teachers would have contacted the Department of Health and Social Security; he may have had a social worker attached to his family, or have been sent to a special school. But none of this was possible in 1921. Instead, his teacher labelled him a 'philosopher', and left him to his own devices.

Left alone against the school-yard wall to watch as the other children played, he became a close observer of others and his environment, and he began to grow aware of the deprivation that surrounded him. While his own family was always poor, they escaped the homelessness that frequently visited other families. Witness to the pathetic attempts of others - whose efforts his mother frequently assisted - to build makeshift shelters out of turf clods and corrugated sheeting (pp.55-56). He developed a fascination for such raw human dramas by which he felt 'queerly exalted'. Such scenes were to inhabit his novels in later life.

A second attack of iritis occurred in 1929. Shorter than the first, it proved to be more damaging yet, psychologically. And, one must surmise, physically. (1) Within days he grew to resent and then refuse the heavy

1, Iritis is usually a mild infection of the eyes with no serious consequences. Inadequate treatment may, however, lead to scarring and the onset of glaucoma. This may have happened in Clemo's case



bandages necessary to protect him from the agony light becomes in this condition. In desperation his mother built a small shelf halfway up the stairs where, it was discovered, with the upstairs and downstairs doors fastened shut the boy could sit in the dark without recourse to the bandages that irked him so much. On this small board of wood, from morning until dusk, Jack Clemo spent several months of his fourteenth year. His mother sought to ease his lonely vigils there by reading to him, but she had other duties to attend. Clemo's daytimes became lonely meditation: he speaks of 'the tremendous concentration of my whole intellectual power into self-analysis, in passionate search for the solution of the problem of my loneliness and separation...' (p.60)

There were happier moments. In the evening he descended to learn to play the little footpump organ his mother had brought from the farm. Impromptu services were held on these occasions with a generous serving of the Sankey hymns Clemo had learnt to love as a small child.

Apart from visits to the doctor Clemo left the house during these months only once. A relative was to be married, and it was decided that the pleasure of such an outing would be greater than Jack's discomfort over being seen swathed about the head and led blindfold by his mother. They could not have anticipated how eventful the day would prove.

At the wedding was a young cousin, a girl of twelve called Evelyn Philips. She delighted in tending to Jack, feeding him, fetching him drinks. For Evelyn, perhaps, it was no more than a variation on a game she had played many times with her dolls. Not so for her playmate. Months of loneliness suddenly gave way to the touch of another's presence, the joy of companionship. For Clemo it awoke new and strange possibilities.

I was hypersensitive and felt the vivid, romantacized thrill of my situation - a blind boy at a wedding, caressed by a strange girl, hearing her assurance that the darkness would pass. My mind...was challenged to express new and magical possibilities, all the more persuasive because their sensuous impact was only through touch and sound... (p.62)

His life was suddenly and excitingly changed. At home, the first evidence of this was his descent from the stairs and the partial return of vision in one eye. Despite difficulty and some discomfort he picked up a book and began to read. And, slowly, his sight was restored. When, shortly after, he read the story of Dante and Beatrice in Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia* he identified himself with it.(1)

Evelyn's influence, accidental though it was, rebounded upon her, and came to seem less than welcome to Mrs Clemo; for Clemo began to rebel. He refused to attend chapel. The miracle of sight he attributed to Evelyn. If mundane love could work such feats why should he continue to worship at the shrine of old and less powerful gods, he thought. Clemo moved from simple, devout Methodism to a form of romantic idealism. He did not abandon the Bible along with Sankey and organized worship, but took it with him on brooding sojourns amidst the tips of the clay-dumps, and searched its pages for an answer to what he felt so thrillingly.

His mother recognised that she was powerless to intervene at this stage, and let him go his way:

he was so baffled by the inner conflict and the mystery of life  
that he had to be left alone to try and find a satisfactory  
answer,(2)

Throughout his teens Clemo sought a truce between the demands of religion and the demands of his own body and soul. It turned him into an avid reader of literature, and made of him a poet and novelist. What one may call a 'natural paganism' could not live with the 'pale Galilean'(2) the chapel offered him as role-model. With a background similar to

1, Evelyn was the first of a series of girls, and then women, on whom he was to build fantasies of supernatural inspiration. Their importance for his life and work can hardly be overestimated.

2, Eveline Clemo, p.13. 3, *Gospel*, p.10.



D.H. Lawrence's it is not surprising he engaged in a similar struggle and sought to relocate religion in a sexual transcendentalism, or what Clemo describes as 'the dark shrine of erotic mysticism'. (1) And so, during years of an awkward and unrequited passion, with the aid of the Bible and what other books he could lay his hands upon, he began the process of seeking to give shape and expression to his own unique interpretation of Christianity.

The need to express himself coincided with a more practical one, the need to earn a living. Physically he was unfit for all but light clerical work; for which temperament and handwriting disqualified him. The issue of work was much debated but remained unresolved until Clemo suggested writing novels. The impulse was not well-received in a nonconformist household, even though Silas and Joseph Hocking, distant cousins, had achieved some fame and wealth from penning Christian romantic fiction. For Clemo the idea of writing was no impulse, its 'prompting motive', as Clemo describes it, was 'the impact of destiny' felt in his encounter with Evelyn Philips, coupled with a sense of frustration 'as months passed with no further development'. (pp.69-70) At the outset literature provided Clemo with a means of emotional compensation. (3)

It was not his serious fiction, however, that found favour with publishers. One day, for relief, he turned his hand to comic dialect stories - a genre popular in West Country almanacks. It was promptly accepted and a half a guinea paid. Half a guinea for the work of minutes made writing doubly attractive, and soothed his mother's Puritan misgivings about fiction. (p 70) With the arrival of that first payment she 'saw God's promise beginning to be fulfilled'. (4) For sixteen years such stories were all the fiction Clemo was to see in print. (5)

These pecuniary diversions apart, his hours were given over to the serious business of writing fiction, with poetry a lesser interest. A family friend, Sam Jacobs, was shown Clemo's work and, suitably impressed,

1. *Gospel*, p.11. 2. *ibid.*, pp.69-70. 3. This interpretation was confirmed by Clemo; 'I wrote my books as prophecies and dared not let the story end in tragic defeat of the hero'; letter to the author.

4. Eveline Clemo, p.16. 5. Collected in *The Bouncing Hills*, Redruth, [1983].



managed to persuade the Ministry of Pensions to fund the boy for a correspondence course in writing. The tutor, Gordon Meggy, made no headway with a young man who proved indifferent to his advice, but, convinced of Clemo's ability, continued to encourage him long after the course had expired. If acceptance as a novelist was to prove elusive, he achieved local recognition for his other adventures into letters as a controversialist and as author of dialect stories.

Evelyn tired of their relationship and Clemo, living in the torment of her indifference, turned his passion, vehemence and frustration into literature. The unpublished novels, poems and the published press letters give evidence of the strain he suffered. This unsuccessful courtship would probably have withered painlessly enough given time. It was at this juncture, however, that Clemo chose to involve himself with the infant Cornish revival movement and unwittingly call down upon his head the wrath of a mother who prior to this had been a model of tolerance.

The Cornish Celtic Movement offered Clemo another outlet for his romantic imagination, fresh contacts in a social world severely circumscribed by poverty, poor public transport and - something else of growing importance - an understanding of why he was not like other young men his age. Commenting on this development Clemo has said he persuaded himself that his 'pure Celtic ancestry was the probable explanation' of his difference from other young men. (p.88) For something like three years Clemo toyed with Celtic notions, struggled vainly to master the language and penned competent ballads on local legends.

The movement had approached him some time in 1932, or possibly very early 1933. These were certainly active years in the revival movement. (1) The Celtic Congress, under the presidency of the persuasive Jenner, was formed in 1932. Following a Christmas speech of his that year a youth movement *Tyr ha Tavas*, meaning Land and Language, was created with a

1, See P. Berresford Ellis, *The Cornish Language and its Literature*, London, 1974,



strong political agenda. (1)

Clemo struggled with Cornish grammar and dreamed of becoming a bard of the Gorsedd - a dream realized long after he had abandoned it, in 1970. But it was Mrs Clemo who ended these misty visions. During the second year of Jack's involvement in the Cornish movement she began he says, 'revealing to me the squalid story of the Clemos and my father's tragic disharmonies', and attempted thereby, it would appear, to deliver a 'death-blow' to Clemo's 'attempt to explain my idiosyncrasies by the magic word 'Celtic''. (p.90) These 'revelations' were traumatic, and set Clemo the painful task of understanding the shadow side of his family inheritance.

His interior world, until then, had been lit by a mixture of Celtic Renaissance and idealised, almost religious, erotic romanticism. The central character of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* seemed to him a version of himself, the novel 'prophetic'. Living psychologically 'almost entirely on the plane of spiritual melodrama', (p.103) the brutal invasion of a sordid reality so near to home was more than he could bear. From this time, for weeks to come, the man who had 'scarcely been more than a name' (p.90) acquired a terrible history. The ugly secrets kept for so many years were narrated one by one.

Day after day he listened to this chastening history and was shaken to his soul. But its immediate impact (that is, for the next few years) was to be the reverse of what his mother must have hoped. Clemo is clear in his autobiography that these family details were revealed in an attempt to discipline a youth grown disturbingly bohemian while yet curiously devout with regards to the Bible. The revelations concerning his father, far from chastening him awoke 'something malicious and cynical'; an emotion that seemed to him at the time and still while writing his autobiography to have been 'biding its time'. The 'last scruples about conventional behaviour' were 'swept away', he records. (p.92) He courted disapproval, seeking, as he puts it, 'crucifixion'. (2)

1. *ibid.*, p.165. 2. The significance of this masochism caught up in Christian imagery and generated by an internal conflict of loyalties (the mother that he depends upon, the father that he must learn to despise) will be explored later.



Clemo's rebellion was limited to a rejection of social graces. For when he flirted with forms of hedonism he found them repugnant.<sup>(1)</sup> He knew and loved the Bible, and the remembered days of a crude and energetic evangelism, and it had to be upon these that he would reconstruct an affirmation of Self. His adolescent rebellion, then, assumed a reactionary course, spurning rationalism and materialism and seeking a religious answer that could encapsulate what he understood as his mutually opposed parental influences. Expressive of this period in his life is his attendance at a rare revivalist meeting. He attended in part, he says, as a gesture of mockery of 'science and organized religion'. (p 106) Listening to the choir singing the Sankey hymns that had been so much a part of his childhood he 'seemed to glimpse...[his]...whole spiritual development from a new angle...[and realised that he]...had been searching for the secret of nonconformist Puritanism, aware that it might contain a revelation sufficient for...[his]...life and destiny...' (p.107) His revolt was not against home but the world outside. The smaller world of his home, however, was haunted, and exorcising or otherwise dealing with its new found ghost was difficult.

Whether these tensions proved too much, or from some other cause, he suffered another temporary attack of blindness: an attack which provoked coldness and rejection from the girl who had last time tended to him so delightfully. His foray into 'the world of Ideal Beauty' (p.107) had come to an end. Blindness passed only to be replaced by the onset of deafness, and Clemo's life, hitherto appallingly self-centred - as he candidly admits (p.115) - became even more self-enclosed. Social contact was reduced almost entirely to his mother and crippled aunt, and Barabara Rowse, the little daughter of newly arrived neighbours: Barbara became his constant companion and playmate.

Meanwhile, pursuit of his literary ambition led him to an undisciplined study of writers and their works - with sobering results.

1, Gospel, p.16.



He came to believe that writers who sought to create a vision outside Christian orthodoxy would almost inevitably meet with tragedy in their personal lives; undisciplined talent being closely related to depravity, a version, as it were, of Freud's hypothesis that creativity is an expression of neurosis. He became 'sadly disillusioned about the literary life, and no longer wondered that Puritanism tended to suppress all writings except tracts and hymns', (pp.126-127). Having rejected the possibility of establishing his own vision in a domain broader than the religion of his childhood, he had nowhere left to turn but inwards where he would, over the following years, fashion his own articulation of that Puritanism: an articulation which would be constantly bedevilled by its own contradictions.

It was at this juncture that he seriously studied Robert Browning and the available biographies of Browning and his wife, Elizabeth Barrett. Their life stories, combined with Browning's poetry, offered him a prospect of creativity which satisfied the two dominant concerns of his life: his sexuality which had become stigmatized for him as part of his depraved inheritance, and the Christianity of his mother, a Polmounter by birth. Whitla has said in his study of Browning's themes that for Browning, 'Love, like art and religion, can be redemptive if it is made incarnate in life's critical moment'.<sup>(1)</sup> Clemo seems to have independently reached a similar conclusion regarding Browning's work, which he then sought to apply to himself. His study of Browning, thoroughly ego-centric, sought to interpret every aspect of his own life as already pre-figured in the lives of the Barrett-Brownings. This explains the hundred or so references to Browning in Clemo's autobiographical works, few of which are concerned with either the man's poetry or his beliefs. He read them as another might read tarot cards. Their lives became the central motif of his numerological superstition.<sup>(2)</sup>

1. William Whitla, *The Central Truth*, Toronto, 1963, p.92. 2. Speaking of the first letter he received from Ruth Peaty, later to become Mrs Clemo, he notes, her 'first letter to me was dated 12 September, and I noted the coincidence - the date of Browning's wedding anniversary', *Marriage*, p.128.



He sought to interpret his psyche and emerging sexuality in terms of their lives. His mother's revelations had disabused him of his romantic idealism: the Barrett-Brownings restored it in a new way, and a way that was at least glossed with Christianity. And so it was that Clemo gave meaning to a life that to outward appearance had seriously regressed. A fact that Clemo readily acknowledges:

I had become so perverse that contact with adult values could only increase the perversity, I had to go back to the beginning and start afresh, to apprehend everything with the spontaneity and innocence of a child, For this strange education I had to be barred off as much as possible from the influence of adults, shut up where the medium of childhood was the only one through which experience touched me.(p.130)

He became utterly dependent upon Barbara Rowse, now five years old. The child replaced Evelyn at the romantic centre of his evolving mythology as this touching episode recalled from his diary shows:

As the last photo [of Evelyn] turned to ashes I took up Barbara's photo and pressed it to my lips and felt the solemn joy of a fresh dedication, God was very near.(p.142)

We are inclined to view this kind of emotional attachment with suspicion and it is, perhaps, not surprising that contemporaries of Clemo feared the worst. In 1941 he was accused of indecency and submitted to a thorough psychological examination which exonerated him.(p.193) The century in which Clemo spiritually dwelt was more tolerant of such friendships, one thinks of Lewis Carroll and Francis Thompson. It was here that Browning proved so valuable, steering a safe course through very dangerous waters and enabling Clemo to 'dramatize inadequate material' and make it yield 'mature inspiration'.(p.142) Had not Browning dreamt of his *Pauline* only to find her in the form of 'pious invalid shut up in a darkened room'? (1)

1, *Gospel*, p.24.

The similarities seemed close enough for Clemo.

Clemo's reading was not confined exclusively to the works of Browning and Barrett-Browning biographies. Garnett's *International Library of Famous Literature*, provided him with literature, religion, history, and philosophy. But everything he read outside of his beloved Browning confirmed his dismal view of the secular world. Only one writer matched Browning in his estimation, and that was Charles Spurgeon. Following Clemo's refusal to attend chapel, except for the occasional revivalist meeting, Spurgeon served as his only real contact with orthodox religion.

And so his world composed itself a quadrate: the Bible, Barbara, Browning and Spurgeon. On Sundays, when his playmate visited her grandparents, he would roam the clayworks 'trying to fuse the fresh memories of Barbara with the wider sense of a destiny covering my whole development' (p.136), the evidence for which he searched his treasured texts. The fusion, such as it was then, found expression in his manuscript novels. When the eighth was rejected he suffered a period of profound despair, aggravated by a feeling that there was little opportunity for his writing to improve. Denied access to local village life, by deafness and his anti-social tendencies, each novel had grown by cannibalization of its predecessor. He was forced constantly to rework old material without fresh stimulus.

But the following year Clemo's library was enriched with the works of T.F.Powys. After reading *Mr Weston's Good Wine* he felt himself 'more profoundly moved by it than by any book' since he had first discovered Browning (p.138). He speedily read everything Powys had published and fashioned one of his own novels, *The Shadowed Bed* after Powys's *The Left Leg*.

Meanwhile he was poor, unemployed and unpublished. Brooding on the crumbling white peaks as he watched the clay workers, finger-high and sugar dusted, below him, his troubled thoughts and the constantly erupting and shifting landscape began to meld. For the first time, and dimly, he perceived something 'symbolic about the scarred and eerie landscape' (1) in

1, 'My Life in the Clay World', *Cornish Review*, Spring, 1970.



which he dwelt. He explored this through the novels he wrote during the thirties, so that by the time he started work on *Wilding Graft* he had begun to develop an appreciation of the landscape's 'deep metaphysical undertones'. Most satisfying was the landscape's freedom 'from oversimplification and sentimentality', (1) necessary correctives to what Clemo identified as the inevitable corruption of art too tuned to Nature and insufficiently attuned to its Creator. (2)

But when the Rowse's moved to a few miles away Clemo's world shrank further, the faith that had illumined it dimmed, and life seemed a 'prison house' (p.157). He had started to convince himself that little Barbara was destined to be his bride. So thoroughly had he adapted himself to this notion that henceforth he could only be attracted to members of the opposite sex in whom he felt 'the same clean, spiritual atmosphere' (p.159) he felt in her. This almost necessarily meant children, for adolescent girls and mature women were tainted with an 'alien element', shown in their use of cosmetics and fashionable clothes. He now found that even the 'slightest trace' of such things were enough to render a female repulsive in his eyes (p.159). Such adornments were evidence of passions steeped in 'racial instinct', desires not 'burnt out' in the heat of spiritual purification.

The foundations of his world began to crumble: all that the innocent five year old had protected him from began to bay at the walls again. As Clemo puts it: 'the sudden wrench of losing the only human material that shielded me from worldly sexuality on the one hand and inhuman fantasy on the other flung me into a panic-stricken demand for an experience that would complete the revelation I had partially grasped' (p.159). In its absence Clemo wrote *The Shadowed Bed*. The novel helped him resist collapse. For two years he lived without the one source of emotional nutrition his psychic health was predicated upon, devotion to a girl-child who was both the promise of, and rehearsal for, a mature union. He established a number of fleeting friendships, which meant little to him but succeeded through them in arousing the suspicion referred to earlier.

1, *ibid*, 2, *Gospel*, p.15.



Village unease came to a head when Mrs Clemo billeted two London girls. Clemo befriended them, and soon became unofficial child-minder to a gang of sexually immature girls. It was not just that so many very young girls were so often in a man's company. Clemo's behaviour with them was distinctly odd. He could be playful one minute and burst into tears the next if one of his playmates disappointed him, seeking comfort in the hugs and kisses of another. It needs to be remembered that while some of these children were no more than friends, Clemo was either deeply attracted to, or felt himself to be in love with, others. He speaks of one girl's 'smouldering undertones' that were 'instinctively within the range of my sympathies'. (p.179) Clemo had set out to substitute child-love for the adult-love he could not obtain, and use the experience to prepare him for marriage. But in doing so he had moved beyond social convention, experiencing adult love for the under-age. (p.191) While nothing immoral occurred, it is surprising the situation was tolerated at all. For Clemo it was an important, if overly long, apprenticeship.

The outbreak of war scarcely impinged upon Clemo's internal struggle, save in so far as it recalled his father's death, or rather, his father's incomprehension of what patriotic personal sacrifice means: 'Had I gone into the Forces I should have fought, and possibly died, in the muddled, stolid, uncomprehending fashion that my father had done, groping in an alien world where I could not be touched by any spark of idealism, any sense of duty or nobility'. Besides which, at the war's onset Clemo was still politically divided. He had, four years earlier, realised his personal preference for Fascism, and in *Confession* candidly admits that had deafness not prevented him he would have joined the Blackshirt brigade so active at that time in Plymouth. He did his bit for the cause in the local press, defending Fascist atrocities.

It is a tribute to Clemo's honesty that these sexually and politically unsavoury issues are raised in his autobiography. Having raised the question of his flirtation with Fascism, Clemo seeks to explain it, finding his sympathies stirred by the 'bombastic and theatrical' behaviour of British fascists, and their European counterparts, which was in accord with

his own tendency towards 'epic vitalism and fanaticism'. (p.150) Clemo goes on to analyze this more thoroughly and connects, thereby, his fascist sympathies with the political implications of his theology:

I had transferred to mature levels the essence of the strange,  
rather terrifying joy I had felt as a child at revivalist meetings  
when the crowd was singing the old hymn;

'There is power, power, power in the Blood,  
Power in the Blood of the Lamb.'

This primitivism had become diverse in a nature like mine that was capable of intellectualizing it. It made me sympathetic, as I grew older, to oddly assorted kinds of eccentrics - to Hitler, to D.H.Lawrence, to the Aimee McPherson type of American 'hot-gospeller'. It is significant, however, that while the first two enthusiasms have passed I am still as appreciative as ever of the 'vulgar hysteria' - as spiritual paralytics call it - of American revivalism. The religious aspect of an enthusiasm was the only one that could grip me for long. Thus I should have become a political misfit even among the Fascists had I been able to join them. Though I liked much of Nietzsche it was rather in Luther's sense that I accepted the dogma of violence. I believed that the true place for it was inside Christianity and that whenever it was applied outside Christianity it became perverted. The Nietzschean doctrine of the Superman was really a perversion of the Christian dogma of Election. The heroic age of the future was the Christian Millennium in which 'saints shall rule the world'. I considered, therefore, that we could get nearest to an heroic age under the dictatorship of a Christian, a Cromwell or Calvin who would see to it that rebellion against God was no longer a paying game. The foundations of democracy were, in my view, undermined by its complete ignoring of theological truth. Its avowed purpose was to make life as agreeable for those who crucified Christ as for those who shared spiritually in His crucifixion...I wanted, in short, a world run much as Calvin had run Geneva, a government that would not



allow the proud and greedy and frivolous to persist in their illusion  
that they were on the winning side. If the Fascist and Nazi leaders were  
attempting something on these lines I entirely approved their policy. (pp150-151)

We have to be clear what Clemo is and is not saying here. There are no grounds for imputing anti-Semitism - certainly the entirety of his work contains not one jot of material of this kind. Those 'who shared spiritually in His crucifixion' and those who 'crucified Christ' refer respectively to the Elect and the Non-elect. At the time of Clemo's Fascist sympathies he had no idea of the genocidal nature of Fascist politics. 'The subsequent history of the European dictators convinced [him] that totalitarian government in the twentieth century must be a very different thing from that which Cromwell and Calvin sought to establish'. (p.152) In *Confession* God is frequently likened to a cruel tyrant forcing the Elect against their will to bend to His. The subsequent volume of 'spiritual biography' *The Invading Gospel* was written, in part, in an attempt to balance the imagery of violence with that of 'divine conquest' and 'surrender'. (1)

Sadly these few pages concerning Clemo's temporary political dallies have been taken up by Donald Davie and used in his debate against socialism. Davie draws particular succour from the sentence immediately continuing on from the above:

...totalitarian government in the twentieth century must be a very different thing from that which Cromwell and Calvin sought to establish. The Christian motive in such men is bound to be corrupted by the modern educational and political systems through which alone they could rise to power.

1. *Gospel*, pp.7 and 19.

Davie comments:

Just *there*, under the bland phrase, 'modern educational and political systems', lies everything that Eliot pointed to when he spoke of Fascism as 'merely the extreme degradation of democracy,'(1)

That Clemo never abandoned his adherence to the *Fuhrerprinzip*, and on the basis of it voted for Churchill in the 1945 General Election judging him more expressive of epic vitalism and bombast (p 228-229) is not for Davie damning proof of the irrationality of fascist sympathies but a valid warning to leaders of the Conservative Party to eschew middle-ground consensualism and go heavy on right wing convictionism. Perhaps Mrs Thatcher read Davie's warning.

There is a serious point here which Davie misses. Puritanism is predicated upon the assumption that each individual has an authoritative inner voice of God, which liberates him from the *dictats* of earthly authority. Yet, Luther, Calvin and Cromwell had tremendous charismatic appeal for their adherents; the same kind of appeal fascist leaders strove to attain. Hitler combined 'bombast' with a political philosophy imitative of Puritanism's elected saints. According to Hitler interbreeding was a violation of divine and political law, it was 'to sin against the will of the eternal Creator'.(2) Sinful marriage is something Clemo has already commented upon with regard to his parents and grandparents. Clearly there is a difference between the minor infringement Clemo recognizes in the marriage of his grandparents and the enormity of transgression Hitler saw in 'inter-racial' marriage. But the difference is quantitative not qualitative. Fear of contamination, the dispensation of the elect, susceptibility to the *Fuhrerprinzip*, and a fear of libertarianism, are themes uniting Fascism and Puritanism.

One needs to ask why?

1. Davie, 'A Calvinist in Politics', *Poetry Nation Review*, v,6: no.1, 1979.

2. Quoted in Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, London, 1975, p.89.



According to Wilhelm Reich there is a close connection between sexual repression, religious mysticism and fascism. He states, 'religious mysticism...condemns sexuality as a sinful phenomenon of humanity...Nationalistic Fascism, on the other hand, transfers sexual sensuality to the "alien race", which is relegated to an inferior status in this way'. (1) 'Alien race', in Clemo's terms equates atheists and his own paternal inheritance. The question stubbornly remains, however: Why is there such a connection between hero worship - Puritan and Fascist - and sexual repression? (2) Reich locates the origins of Fascism and religious fanaticism in the contradictions that arise in the individual when subjected to intolerable demands for sexual repression. The sexual drive is not, Reich argued, repressed; it is sublimated instead:

The man...whose sexual structure is full of contradictions,  
must continually remind himself to control his sexuality, to preserve  
his sexual dignity, to be brave in the face of temptation, etc.,  
All the elements of the reactionary man's structure are developed in this  
struggle...Every form of mysticism derives its most active energy and, in part,  
also its content from this compulsory suppression of sexuality, (3)

Mysticism, whether religious or political, is reactionary ('Every form of mysticism is reactionary and the reactionary man is mystical') and derives from the need to sublimate sexuality under a particularly oppressive patriarchal sexual order, (4) whether that order be political and imposed from above, or personal and imposed from within.

Clemon's Fascist sympathies, then, are related to his brand of Puritanism, and both would appear to arise from the same source, the sublimation of sexual desire. Considering the nature of his (non)sexual relationships, and his postponement of immediate need-gratification towards

1. Reich, p.89. 2. This connection is not absolute; Christopher Hill's study of Milton fully establishes that one strand of English Puritanism was sexually libertarian, on the basis of its Puritan doctrine; see, *Milton and the English Revolution*, London, 1977, pp.4, 20 and 261. 3. Reich, p.55. 4. *ibid.*, pp.88-89.

a future idealized relationship in which sexual attraction would, it appears, play a minor role compared with 'the suffusion of that beauty by a soul which is on fire with love for his Lord', (1) the connection between the form of religion Clemo desired and created for himself - which will become evident in the exploration of his first volume of poetry - his political preferences and his transcendent version of sexuality is a plausible one. Clemo outlines himself the shift onto religion of demands more appropriate to sex: '...I felt, religion must involve a fusion of soul and sense, a baptism or intoxication akin to the erotic'. (2)

To return. Clemo was throughout the war indifferent to its implications and its spectacles alike, (p.195) apart from following local developments in the press as source material for subsequent novels. This indifference, Clemo notes, is reflected in the novel written during the war, *Wilding Graft*, which enacted the realisation of his romantic desires. But one incident, the trial of the sadistic killer Neville Heath, did seize his imagination and helped recast some of the novel's details. Completion of this novel saw a sudden unexpected burst of poetic activity of the like Clemo had never known before. The poet of *The Clay Verge* was born.

The post war years require less attention. Clemo was, by then, thirty years old. His formative years were over. But there are some events that are essential to his art, and three are of the greatest importance, and it is significant that they all concern romance.

The first liaison was with a young poetess, Eileen Funston, who had published a verse testament of her faith, followed by a prose statement of similar nature. A correspondence ensued, in which Clemo discovered that while her nature was poetic and Romantic, 'she was painfully submitting it to church discipline'. (3) They corresponded for eight months, raised, wrestled over and then abandoned the idea of marriage (she was sixteen). Short though this liaison was its impact upon Clemo was profound:

1. *Gospel*, p.78. 2. *op.cit.*, p.15. 3. *Marriage*, p.43.



It was not until the following year that I realised what a drastic psychological change had taken place in me through this extraordinary friendship. For eight months I had been pouring out to a young woman my innermost thoughts and longings about God, sex, marriage, and the spreading of Christian truth through art. I could never be the same man again. From 1949 onwards it was impossible for me to express a savage glee at the destruction of earthly beauty. (1)

With his hopes of marriage dashed, Clemo tried to reconstruct his poetic vision. The poems which appeared as *The Clay Verge* had disturbed Eileen when she had read the manuscripts. It was, for her, neither a lover's vision, nor a Christian one.

I want no scent or softness round us  
When we embrace;  
We could not trace  
Therein what beauties bound us,

This truculent gale, this pang of winter  
Awake our joy,  
For they employ  
Moods that made Calvary splinter.  
(*'A Calvinist in Love'*)

Clemon was determined upon marriage. The poetry which had so briefly bloomed had been growing within him for many years, and so well expressed his Christian-erotic vision, that to have to reject it at a time when Clemon himself was suffering Eileen's rejection of him - 'Her rejection of me as a husband was final, and my inner world was often dark and desolate in the closing months of that year' (p.51) - was doubly difficult. Yet Eileen had clearly written, 'I cannot love your poetry because it is not beautiful', (2) and her objection Clemon guessed would be repeated by others.

1, *Marriage*, p.50. Henceforth page references in text refer to *Marriage*.

2, Extract from an Eileen Funston letter quoted by Clemon in a letter to the author.

As Clemo has commented himself, it is an 'awkward' fact that 'my radical change of outlook resulted from marriage prospects'.<sup>(1)</sup> But this is a natural consequence - however difficult it may be for a poet sincere in his poetic vision - of his romantic faith. 'I always felt' Clemo said in a letter to the author, 'that until a young woman promised to marry me she had no right to try to change my views, but when I thought of her sharing my life I instinctively adjusted myself to her.'

And so Clemo began to rethink his clayworld symbolism. The struggle is recorded in *Wintry Priesthood*, his 1951 Festival of Britain prize winning poetic sequence. Then, in 1954, under the inspiration of Billy Graham's British evangelical crusade, he began his own testament. Not a second volume of autobiography (that was to wait thirty years), but a 'Christian manifesto', *The Invading Gospel*.

In its content alone it is a remarkable book: Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Niebuhr, rub shoulders with Harold Begbie, Vachel Lindsay and Billy Graham; T.F. Powys, Lawrence, Nietzsche, jostle for space alongside Chesterton, Aimee Macpherson and Hugh Redwood. W.H. Auden, C.S. Lewis and Oral Roberts, not to mention 'the prophet Ezekiel' and the book of Genesis, are all quoted on one page and each in apparent agreement with his neighbours. Karl Marx, Emily Bronte, Darwin, Emerson, Shelley and Bertrand Russell are all summoned within two sentences and dismissed as intellectually bankrupt, with complete confidence and on the basis of Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia* and Garnett's *International Library of Famous Literature*. Clemo summons, judges, and pronounces on over three hundred published writers, with on average five 'names' appearing on every page. The book exudes confidence, and has an engaging, idiosyncratic style that well reflects its author's personality.

1, *Marriage*, p.50. Subsequent primary references will be to this volume and page numbers cited in the text.



Written to win converts *The Invading Gospel* spurns seduction of the mind as it does of the heart. For Clemo, the sexual lives of apes and atheists are indistinguishable, and he says so. (1) The medical care of a psychiatrist is irrelevant if the patient's 'status before God' remains the same. (2) And a man who had experienced only two brief love affairs, and those conducted entirely by correspondence, felt no hesitation in passing judgement on 'all divorces, separations and infidelities,' (3) or in asserting that, 'the Christian view of sex...means cosmic revolution, foreshadowing a new earth and enabling men and women to enter, here and now, a realm of experience which is completely barred to the materialist'. (4)

It is a breathtaking, dazzling performance, supremely confident: a text from which all doubt has been expunged. And yet, *The Invading Gospel* was written in a time of wretchedness. Six months before its inception Clemo was 'weakened by heart trouble, severe palpitations and fluttering, and attacks of cerebral paralysis in which...[he] was semi-conscious for hours'. (p.82) He was prematurely grey, deaf and stooped, and still only in his thirties. As he eagerly followed newspaper reports of the Billy Graham tour he realised reading was becoming increasingly difficult. He had to adapt his handwriting, originally a miniscule scrawl now increasingly a child-like print, in order to follow his own meditations. By the time the Graham tour had inspired him to add his own weight directly to Christian witness even his typewriter keys were indistinguishable. Clemo turned to his mother, who had never typed before, and struggled to make of her an amanuensis. A deaf and blind writer and a keyboard-illiterate mother struggled to hear the words and find the keys in a three year long battle against all odds, and with Clemo so weakened by his heart condition that exertion for more than a short while left him reeling, or physically sick. Out of this wretchedness he produced, for all its evangelical narrow-mindedness, its sweeping generalizations, its occasional pomposities, a book of exuberance and insight: a rare enough combination.

1, *Gospel*, p.75. 2, *ibid.*, p.87. 3, *ibid.*, p.76. 4, *ibid.*, p.76.



How did he manage it? Clemo himself, more than twenty years later, reflected upon this and failed to satisfy himself with his answer: real faith? God's hand? or 'the result of a desperate clutch at something that looked big enough to support me at a time when the floods were trying to tear up all my roots?' (p.87) Whatever it was, a pattern was repeating itself once more: at a time of crisis either an unexpected feminine contact, or a new project for a book in which faith in the transcendent possibilities of such a contact, came to him, sustaining him and 'filling a gap before the next crisis in my search for marriage brought me back to erotic poetry.' (p.87)

Shut off from the world by deafness and 'imprisoned by the white scum' (p.95) of glaucomal blindness Clemo experienced a richer, more expansive social life than he had ever known before. While *The Clay Verge* sold only one hundred and eighty copies, his second collection of poetry, *The Wintry Priesthood* received much praise. His tiny quarrier's cottage felt less isolated as numerous writers, artists and journalists called upon him. Some, like Lionel Miskin and Charles Causley, were to become firm friends. *Wilding Graft* had won the Atlantic Award, and his output to date earned him a Civil List pension 'for his contribution to literature', thanks to the efforts of Causley and C. Day Lewis. His first volume of autobiography, followed by his spiritual 'manifesto' attracted the religious along with the artistic and ensured him contact and callers from diverse intellectual worlds. This, combined with his evangelical confidence, produced a batch of poems, subsequently collected under the title *Frontier Signals*. For a while it even seemed as though he would recover his hearing, if only in one ear. But some malign force remained at work where his health was concerned. He did, after a heavy cold in November 1956, restore partial hearing. But even with an aid, only household noises were distinguishable. Speech remained unintelligible, a conspiracy of sound. (pp.101-102)

He lived in faith, supported by friendship, (in respect of which he was prepared to undertake tasks quite outside his sympathies (pp.80-83))



a further seven years. Then he received a reckless, passionate letter from a Devonshire art teacher, Mary Wiseman. In Clemo's own words, her first letter 'plunged me into my first full-scale romance, which was to fill the next four years with all the joys and miseries...' (p.115)

Mary's intention from the start seems to have been the complete reshaping of Clemo into the man she believed he really was, underneath the narrowness of his religious convictions. (p.116) They met for the first time the following month, February. She left the Clemos feeling 'as if a volcano had erupted' in their midst, and Jack's mother convinced Mary Wiseman would bring nothing but trouble. (p.117) On his mother's advice, Clemo recalls, he wrote Mary a letter indicating their feelings about her. This rejection fired Mary to more extravagant claims as to her spiritual and artistic kinship with him. They soon came to view each other as misguided but redeemable under proper tutelage. According to him, Mary saw her task as weaning Clemo of his religious shackles, freeing him to be the Lawrentian artist she craved: while Clemo writes that even though he knew her to be misguided in her pantheistic version of Christianity, he could 'help to draw her in' (p.117) to the true faith.

From the picture of her that Clemo paints in *The Marriage of a Rebel*, Mary was not someone who would fit into the Clemo's cramped world. She craved sensation, purpose, and drove Jack and his mother with more determination than they could ever hope to muster in their defence. She insisted, Clemo records, that he adopt basic standards of civilised cleanliness: and learn Braille. From Clemo's perspective, these were the demands love placed upon him and he complied, if without enthusiasm (p.118).

There were doubts on Mary's side too, Clemo records. Small things irked her. A working-class poet was very romantic, but distressingly working-class. (p.119) Passionate about the natural beauty of the Lake District, the mining district of Cornwall appalled her: as did Clemo's clay-pit poetry. When she obtained a school post at Windermere, where her widowed mother was to retire, her uncertainties became too strong and she



broke the engagement.

This blow seriously affected Clemo's health: that the romantic whirlwind should pass over as suddenly and stunningly as it had arrived was more than he could bear. He continued to write and managed thereby to reawaken the romance. Within two months the relationship was on again, and Mary was as demanding as ever: he would have to move to the Lake District if they were to advance the relationship towards marriage, and insisted he visit there. She sought changes, too, Clemo notes, to his poetry. Mary set him to read Eliot, Hopkins and Dylan Thomas in Braille, (p.120) poets more congenial to her, and urged him to a more modern style. 'She was an exacting critic, and constantly urged me to a more oblique, subtle and colourful style...."I want you to write poems *for* me, not *about* me"' she would complain. (p.120) But by December 1966 Clemo had to recognize that the relationship was finally over. He buried the pain as before in another book, busying himself with the preparations for the publication of *Cactus on Carmel* and came to realise fully the impact Mary had had upon him as a poet. 'I realised that Mary had not come into my life by chance or mistake, however baffling it might seem that an anti-church aesthete should mould and liberate a writer who was drawing nearer to the churches and loathed aestheticism.' (p.126)

And Clemo waited for the next letter from an admiring female, hoping this time it would not fail. That letter arrived the following summer, augered even by its post mark - '12 September, and I noted the coincidence - the date of Browning's wedding anniversary...' (p.128) Within three months Clemo and the letter's authoress, Ruth Peaty, 'were discussing the possibility of our marriage'. (p.130) It was to be a further six months until they would meet.

Haste for marriage on Clemo's part is understandable: he had striven for it for thirty years and just recently felt it slip once again from his grasp. He believed himself destined to a special kind of marriage. Remarkably, Ruth Peaty had recently come to feel something similar. Jilted by the Brethren fellow worshipper for whom she had waited for eight years, like a 'world renouncing nun' ('Wedding Eve', *The Echoing Tip*), she had come to imagine herself 'as a sort Heloise figure keeping herself for her



Abelard'. (1) In her biography of the Clemos Magnusson remarks that, 'If you had the task of devising a training course which would prepare a wife for Jack Clemo, you could try for a century without coming up with anything better than the one Ruth Peaty was going through'. (2) Magnusson is referring only to the immediate emotional 'pain and loss' (3) of a jilted bride. It is surprisingly true of all that preceded this unhappy event, too. Ruth's mother's first husband, Herbert Rhodes, was killed in action shortly after their marriage. Her second husband, William Peaty, was from a family in which a pattern similar to the Bullen-Polmounter's existed, the father being less educated, and less refined. The grandparents' marriage was similar, too. (4) William served in the Marine Light Infantry, and was invalided out with shell shock, an experience that 'blighted the rest of his days'. (5) Ruth's mother saw her marriage as a divine calling, a substitute for the promise she had made God to work as a missionary in India. She nursed Peaty and raised three children, and saw her husband tragically decline until his death in a mental hospital where he spent the last six years of his life. (6) It was because of her own experience that Ruth's mother would 'advise her daughter...to think carefully before embarking on a vocational marriage to a man with infirmities' (7) : advice which was to be ignored.

Not only had family destiny seemed to have shaped her to be the bride of a blind, deaf, religious poet who conceived marriage as a spiritual vocation: her temperament had also. As a child she had been a tomboy, (8) a characteristic Clemo had always been especially attracted by; and Ruth was given to mystical musings. It is scarcely surprising then that, when, after only forty eight hours in each other's company, Jack Clemo proposed, Ruth unhesitatingly accepted. (p.132) On the 26th October, 1968 they were married, vindicating thereby Clemo's life-long belief that he was destined to be married.

1, Sally Magnusson, *Clemon: A Love Story*, Tring, 1986, p.78. 2, *ibid.*, p.79.

3, *ibid.*, p.53. 4, *ibid.*, p.54. 5, *ibid.*, p.57. 6, *ibid.*, p.54. 7, *ibid.*, p.57. 8, *ibid.*, p.124

Husband and wife settled quietly into the cottage where the widowed Eveline had raised her child. At Ruth's insistence modern plumbing was installed, and a proper bathroom built. But the district still galled her, and Ruth could only endure it through regular trips to her 'home' in Weymouth. In 1973 Ruth's mother died, leaving the Weymouth house to her sister Bella. Four years later Eveline Clemo passed away peacefully in her sleep. Within months Jack and Ruth left Cornwall, to share Ruth's sister's house in Weymouth. The poet of the claylands had irrevocably crossed the frontier.



## CHAPTER TWO

### 'DEAR SIR'

In November 1930, in an issue of *Children's Weekly*, Jack Clemo declared his literary ambition:

I am third cousin to Silas K. Hocking. You will be pleased to learn that I am taking up a literary profession, and enclose one of my poems, hoping you will include it in your topping G.S.B. letters.(1)

They did. In the years that followed Clemo had more than seventy letters published, most of them in the *Cornish Guardian*. With the exception of eight comic dialect stories the letters were the only prose for which Clemo found sympathetic editors for sixteen years. Added together, the letters total some thirty thousand words and deal with matters as diverse as the sanctity of the Sabbath, the quality of cinematic art, sex education for children, Epstein's *Genesis*, realism and the modern novel, and theology. Clemo has himself summed up their significance, saying they are 'The only public evidence of my spiritual growth until I entered my thirties'.(2)

By themselves, however, the letters would often be misleading. For example, in 1933 he wrote condemning the willingness of local churches to have their premises used for dancing:

Dancing does not become spiritual through being transferred to church premises. It is still what Tolstoy - and even its realistic advocates - declare it to be - a modified form of free love.(3)

1. Found amongst Clemo's papers. 2. *Confession*, p.85. 3. Unless otherwise indicated quotations from newspapers are taken from the *Cornish Guardian*.

In *Confession* Clemo relates another occasion on which he had similarly expressed himself, and adds:

But I knew it was not quite so simple, because I found that while I detested the life of ballrooms, I did not object at all to the life of brothels, but often felt a thrilling sympathy with it,(1)

The cause of this sense of sympathy was probably his mother's recent revelations concerning his father and other Clemo relatives. His public denouncement of dancing needs to be understood against this backdrop, which itself needs to be properly understood. Clemo was not at this or any other time an advocate of libertarianism. He was attempting to reconcile the opposing forces within himself - the moral values of his mother and father - or, rather, the understanding of his father which his mother had imposed upon him. What Stanley Fish has said of the impossibility of a reader ever not being involved in an interpretative act is surely true also of a writer reflecting upon his own experience.(2) This is well demonstrated in Clemo's frequent changes to the date when he experienced 'real faith'. In a score of letters through the early thirties Clemo expressed his religious convictions with the certitude of a man whose faith was secure. Yet, in *Confession* he clearly identified 'the winter of 1937-38'(3) as the time when what he refers to as his 'paganism' was finally expunged and orthodoxy embraced. The same year *Confession* was published, 1949, Clemo firmly asserted in an article in *The Christian Leader*, that the faith he held in 1938 was 'extreme and rather perverse'.(4) By 1955 he could describe the poems of *The Clay Verge*, and by association the faith held during the forties, as cathartic exercises in which he had 'rid himself of the last

1. *Confession*, p.96. 2. 'We are never not in a situation. Because we are never not in a situation, we are never not in an act of interpretation. Because we are never not in the act of interpreting, there is no possibility of reaching a level of meaning beyond or below interpretation'; in 'Normal Circumstances...', *Critical Inquiry*, 4,4, 1978. 3. *Confession*, p.143. 4. *The Christian Leader*, March 1949.



dregs of individualism'.(1) These very same poems had been seen in 1948-49 as the proof of mature faith.(2)

Clemo's texts, autobiographical and otherwise, are part of his struggle for self-replication. Where statements concur over time we may be reasonably confident that this represents Clemo's stable position, where, on the other hand, statements alter or contradict earlier ones, we are likely to be encountering the consequences of internal pressures not necessarily made evident in those texts.

Rather than survey the bulk of the press letters, four themes which recur - either through the letters or on through subsequent later publications - will be identified and examined. One such area of concern, not surprisingly in a writer, is literature. Not only does Clemo frequently return to this topic, the statements he has made are consistent. For example, thirty years separate his first letter on the subject, (1931) from his 1961 'credal' statement in the journal *Unicorn*(3) and yet the agreement between them is remarkable. But there are sudden shifts here too; shifts which while apparently revealing a change of position, in fact only serve to further reveal the firm centre of belief constant over time. The following is a representative example. In 1931 Clemo became embroiled in a dispute over what constituted 'good' reading for people his age - he was then fifteen. Clemo defended realist representations of human behaviour, maintaining that realist novels were less harmful to the adolescent mind than idealized versions which avoided or denied the uglier aspects of human life. He castigated 'Little religious tales, sweet, nice, with exaggerated purity'. Clemo's preference here is similar to that expressed in *Confession* with regard to dancing - a favouring of the unseemly as a gesture of solidarity, perhaps, with the image he had been given of his father. He had read Daudet, Tolstoy, Hugo, and thrilled to their presentations of 'the tragic undertones of life'.(4)

1, From a typescript of the West Region BBC radio series *Signatures*, 'My Spiritual World as a Poet', July 13, 1955. 2, *Confession*, p.221. 3, 'Jack Clemo states his case', *Unicorn*, Winter, 1961. 4, *Confession*, p.69.



But it is evident from the letters and Clemo's commentary upon this period in *Confession* that he was indifferent to these novels as literature. The latter, 'except as the presentation of the raw material through which...theology worked, was a bore'.<sup>(1)</sup> Clemo read literature theologically, seeing in the realist/naturalistic presentation evidence of sin and seeking proof of punishment. Novels had, for him, to be peopled by Christians and non-Christians in a battle which reflected the internal struggle he was caught up in between identification with opposing parts of his own self. He experienced, one may surmise, a fascination for moral corruption, as though it gave him the reflection of a hitherto hidden part of himself. But he was theologically saturated and expected to see the wicked punished and the good vindicated. Such a demand allows for realism and naturalism as descriptive practices, indeed it calls for the latter, but simultaneously rejects completely the associated philosophy of the novel these techniques support. Similarly, where attractive Christian characters could not be identified,<sup>(2)</sup> and where expiation was absent, or postponed beyond the novel, Clemo was dismissive. This is particularly evident in his letters on American cinema and on D.H. Lawrence, published in the spring of 1932. His diatribe against the cinema was the result of his first 'and most likely ...last' trip to a cinema. The subject matter of this 1932 film appalled him for 'It dealt with marriage problems, seduction, divorce - all that muck of immorality without which the cinema would cease to exist'. Here we see Clemo repulsed by the presentation of human moral weakness. But without knowledge of the film he viewed we cannot comment further.

There is a related aspect which deserves mention, however. The letter quoted above provoked a strong reaction. One respondent argued for the cathartic and thus therapeutic value of films of this kind. But Clemo, it is evident, had been shocked. In reply he insisted that once a young person 'has seen a sex film it has received something of which it may never be totally rid.' Catharsis is a secular version of the concept of redemption, and as such it excludes the Christian element Clemo demanded.

1, *ibid.*, p.101. 2, See Clemo's remarks on Shakespeare, *Confession*, p.100.



The sense of personal pollution evident in his cinema experience is even more pronounced in his remarks on Lawrence. He commented:

I have a book on my shelf now in which Lawrence appears to be at his 'best', forgetful of everything save his beloved sex. Deliriously he tells us that if only men and women were educated to think of sex and nothing else, we could all manage on twenty five shillings a week.

The letter ends on a note which anticipates the 'Lady Chatterley' obscenity trial: 'I would rather' he remarked, 'burn it than that it should get into a girl's hands'. At the time of this correspondence Clemo was writing his first novel. It is a story in which an under-age boy and girl have an illicit sexual affair. The boy is only capable of making love to the girl by fantasizing that his dead sister(1) supernaturally inhabits the body of his girlfriend. A child is born of this affair. This supernatural fantasy, it would appear, cleansed the act, for Clemo at the time, of its immoral overtones.(2)

Clemo drew a distinction, it is evident from his letters, between his own literary treatment of human behaviour and that of other twentieth century novelists. For he could condemn 'The general trend of modern fiction, of its deification, not of sex, but of sex perversion and sex caricature'. What he objected to, it seems, was the tendency in novels to deny the doctrine of original sin. And it was this denial which led him to prefer the novels of Hall Caine to those of Dickens, Scott, or Lawrence. For while Hall Caine's novels contain seduction and rape scenes, such moral decrepitude is presented as part of a tragic human destiny against which the valiant hero, invariably a practising Christian, triumphs. Even Shakespeare seemed to him to be 'bogged in a trivial worldly rut'.(3)

1, If Mrs Clemo's first born had survived, Jack would have had a sister. 2, Clemo provides a brief summary of the plot on page 80 of *Confession*, and adds 'The book showed clearly my morbid fear of the physical side of life.' 3, *ibid.*, p.100.

His interest in the novel, both as reader and writer, was not 'literary at all, but religious.' (1) This is evident in a 1933 letter praising the novelist Hall Caine. Clemo wrote:

My spiritual life is quickened and purged by the terrific sledge-hammer blows which, in *The Christian* and his other novels, Hall Caine deals at the very roots of sexual vice,

Clemon, I suspect, needed novels to project the kind of moral cleansing he felt in need of himself, polluted as he was by his mother's revelations. Caine was important to Clemon for another reason too during these years. While Clemon had family precedents for writing fiction, his cousins Silas and Joseph Hocking, and while both cousins communicated a 'mood of moral indignation and evangelising fervour' (2) in many of their books, Caine was meatier stuff altogether. So Caine came within the limited group of writers of which Mrs Clemon would approve, while allowing Jack to indulge his fascination with human depravity. Caine, thereby, became a model of the kind of novelist Clemon could imitate.

Clemon's various remarks on D.H. Lawrence are worth comment. In *Confession* he frequently remarks upon similarities of biography and his fascination for Lawrence is obvious. In October 1932 he condemned Lawrence in these terms: 'he disbelieved in God and held Christian morality in violent contempt...The aim of Lawrence's work was to make boys regard girls and girls regard boys as mere spermatazoa and nothing more'. By 1949 his view had moderated, but he could still speak of Lawrence's 'heresy' concerning 'the essential holiness of the body'. (3) A few years later, in *The Invading Gospel* Clemon was to write of Lawrence that he 'loved flowers because they suggested manure and thus gave sanction to the flowering of the flesh in moral rottenness'. (4) Twenty five years later (significantly

1, *Confession*, p.100. 2, See Clemon's article 'The Hocking Brothers', *The Cornish Review*, Spring, 1969.  
3, *Confession*, p.204. 5, *Gospel*, p.74.



after his marriage -.although the remark is addressed to his post-war feelings) Clemo speaks of Lawrence in terms of a 'higher paganism' making contact with Christian truth.(1) An attitude towards Lawrence which Clemo attributes to 1948: this view strongly opposes that published in 1958.

There is continuity here. Clemo's fascination with immorality, as a reflection of part of himself - his Clemo heritage - causes him to return to Lawrence. On doing so, he feels moral repulsion, an indication that, unlike Lawrence, he (Clemo) has been redeemed. If Clemo's autobiographical statement re 1948 is correct it still needs to be put into context. For roughly two years Clemo had been harbouring hopes of a romance with Eileen Funston, a young woman who, like Lawrence, had a passionate love of natural beauty. Through 1949 and 1950 Clemo felt his attitude towards nature changing under her influence.(2) The first version of 'The Twin Beds' was written in 1950,(3) at the peak of her influence over Clemo. By the time he wrote the words quoted above for *The Invading Gospel*, he was blind as well as deaf, and without marital prospects, and caught in the grip of a Christian fundamentalist revival. Married, by 1980 Clemo could afford to be less concerned about dogma and more generous in attitude.(4)

This continuity, (which is, as I believe this chapter has so far demonstrated, always closely related to Clemo's struggles for self-replication(5)) can be extended to his views about art and creativity generally. In 1933 he praised the sculptor Epstein for being an artist who saw through the flesh to the spiritual truth. He praised what he saw as unambiguously Christian art. In later years he was to find other examples, Browning, Wallis, Gill. Central to the issue of creativity is Clemo's association of it with moral laxness. In letters published in the 1930s, for example the letter in *John o' London's Weekly*, 12 October, 1935, he expresses the view that 'neurosis, sadism, debauchery' are synonymous with creativity, and that unless the artist is prepared to accept the

1. *Marriage*, p.41. 2. *ibid.*, p.50. 3. *Date on manuscript poem*. 4. See present paper, Chapter Ten. 5. I am applying to Clemo, as a reader of other people's texts, an interpretative strategy advocated by Norman Holland, see *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, Oxford, 1968.



fundamentals of Christianity, finding in them a corrective to those morbid impulses which unbalance and pervert the finest literary conception' he is doomed to disillusionment and probably moral collapse. Very similar points were to be made in 1949(1), 1958(2) and 1961(3). A knowledge of Clemo's biography leads the reader to understand Clemo feared such a moral collapse himself.

A similar pattern emerges when we examine Clemo's various statements concerning the field of ideas, or philosophy loosely understood. In a debate that raged throughout 1936-37 in the *Cornish Guardian*, entitled 'Christianity and Citizenship', Clemo urged the provocative point that Christ's teachings were of no more value than those of Plato, Euripides and Mohammed. What made Christ distinctive, he reasoned, was his divinity. 'Civilized Christianity' that is, Liberal Theology, 'would make us all perfect citizens and wretchedly thwarted men and women'. Twenty years later he made this similar point:

Human character can be changed in many ways - through psychiatry, or a happy marriage, or an operation on the brain. But whatever the benefit [that] may accrue to society through such changes the person retains his original status as a condemned sinner. He is still an unregenerate member of a fallen race.(4)

In other words, 'To change men's lives is not enough. The basic thing that needs to be changed is...his status before God'.(5)

Clemon's personal understanding of sexuality begins around 1930.(6) He enveloped his feelings for Evelyn Philips with a 'mystical', supernatural aura. His ideas concerning a cleansed and Christian sexuality developed under the influence of Robert Browning, his autobiography informs us, from 1935 onwards. A *Cornish Guardian* letter from 1934, while providing an emphasis later statements may disapprove of, nonetheless shows remarkable continuity with later prose statements and even his most recent verse

1, *Confession*, p.198. 2, *Gospel*, p.37. 3, Clemon, *Unicorn*,

4, *Gospel*, p.87. 5, *ibid*. 6, *Confession*, p.7



concerned with his doctrine of 'trans-sexual' (1) love. In 1934 he wrote, '...the church had nothing to do with my own conversion'. My pathway to the stars was along the little, despised, twilit trail of sex'. The letter concluded with lines from a poem of his (now apparently lost):

Arise to let men know  
That Christ's own face can glow  
In love's embrace, and kisses be as prayers!

The outrage this letter caused allowed Clemo a reply in which he said that his '...chief point...was not that sex can convert anybody, but that Christ can convert sex - convert it from something vile and shameful to something which has a place in the Creator's highest Scheme'. In later statements he was to speak of a unique Christian 'spiritual biology' which, within Christian marriage, ensures that 'physical union is already trans-sexual, and the biology involved is eternal and incorruptible because it is covered by the Atonement'. (2) More than twenty years separate the poetic cry of the teenager from the rigorously thought out theology of the mature man, yet the parameters of his erotic theology are unaltered.

Unchanged also over decades is the sense of mission Clemo has. Scolded for the 'shocking' letter above, Clemo retorted, 'I've got to go on with the work for which I am best fitted', a remark that acquires greater significance when set alongside his conception of 1958 that he had a divine 'work' to carry out. (3) A work appropriate to his understanding that not only was he one of the elect, (4) but that his marriage was similarly predestinated (see 'Wedding Eve', *The Echoing Tip*).

The eroticism attached to Clemo's version of Christianity has not changed its nature either. While the poetry of *The Clay Verge*, on a superficial reading may entertain a certain amount of sexual licence,

1, *Gospel*, p.81. 2, *ibid*. 3, Clemo, for example, in *Gospel*, pp.121-122 writes; '...I can say that my own dominant aim has been to do some pioneering work around the contemporary bridgehead of faith, repairing and restoring the paths of Evangelical doctrine and Christian marriage'. 4, *Gospel*, p.115.

such apparent excesses need to be balanced against poems like 'Charlotte Nicholls', (*Cactus on Carmel*) and prose statements made throughout Clemo's career. His eroticism is always closely related to marriage, is only conceivable within marriage, and even then only within a certain kind of Christian marriage.(1) For only thus surrounded by protective walls could Clemo ever contemplate sexuality without anxiety. The following 1935 statement succinctly anticipates over thirty years of theological effort:

The true beacon light, the radiant rebuke to worldliness and  
sensuality, is the Christian home, the sanctuary of redeemed sex,  
enshrining the wayward secret of grace through which we can deny ourselves  
while enjoying ourselves,(2)

Two things are noticeable in the above quotation: the phrase 'through which we can deny ourselves while enjoying ourselves' and the word 'sanctuary'. The former, if somewhat too crudely, reveals the psychological conundrum Clemo has sought to solve through his life and work: how to satisfy the opposed forces within himself, sensualist father, Puritan mother. The word 'sanctuary' means both *tabernacle* and a *place of retreat*, from, presumably, a world perceived as sexually polluted. His treatment of sexual love as something potentially irradiated by Christ, as in the 1934 poem quoted above, has remained a feature of all his work: while the concept of love as a place of retreat is expressed again in the following lines from a 1975 poem, 'Herman Melville':

.....But I have withdrawn;  
My wife the true surrendered island,  
The sole, frail hint of palm and throne.

The struggle to resolve and harmonize what Clemo experienced as opposing destinies led him early on to reject, if not Christianity, then

1. *Gospel*, p. 80. 2. Twenty years later he was to repeat these words exactly, *Gospel*, p. 75.



its established forms. So that we find him in a letter of 1934 proclaiming: 'An Emily Bronte - wild, moorland spirit, untamed, untutored, sees Christianity clearer than a theological professor'. Three years later he was to express another impatience with the Church:

We have waited long enough for the Church to strip off  
its kid gloves,,,and drive the naked Gospel fist into the  
face of iniquity. If organized religion shirks its task  
then outsiders must do it. The banner must be raised, the  
challenge must be answered, the war of God against pride  
and lust and mammon must go on,

The language here shows the influence of his Fascist tendencies at their height. Or, perhaps, as Clemo has preferred, his religious allegiance explains why he was temporarily in sympathy with Fascism, which he mistakenly perceived as a political version of the Church Militant.

Mysticism is a slippery term, its use in this paper made more difficult by Clemo's frequent application of it to himself. But there is nothing in Clemo's published or manuscript material the slightest bit suggestive of a desire for union with God in the way of the poet St John of the Cross, or the writer Meister Eckhart, and his identification in 1934 with Emily Bronte requires another interpretation, and one that unites it with the 1937 statement. For what Clemo has sought in his 'mysticism' (to misapply the word to his spiritual endeavour) is not unity with the Godhead, or oblivion of the Self but, rather, a purity of Christian *praxis*, and an intensity of belief that assures him his faith is secure. Lack of this kind of Kierkegaardian intensity of belief in a Wholly Other is what he then and consistently since has condemned in Liberal Theology, and Social Methodism. It was, then, impatience with what Clemo saw as the Church's tolerance of what Clemo considered its enemies, rather than mystical aspirations, which led him to to make statements like those printed above. That, coupled with increasing isolation from its community. When Clemo

later rejoined the Church, 'in spirit' in 1950, in practice gradually over a period of time from then onwards, he was to reject sectarianism, experiment with Catholic relics and Mariology, while remaining in name a Calvinist.(1) He continued to loathe theological liberalism.(2)

For Clemo the outbreak of war was a massive demonstration of the kind of failure of nerve he associated with Liberal Theology. In a 1939 letter, he ridiculed his neighbours: 'Fear is a disease of the soul and cannot exist with Christianity, let material conditions be what they may'. He scoffed at air-raid precautions: 'as for so-called Christians who have hurried to safeguard themselves with gas-masks, I can only surmise that they believe in a God Who is unable to protect them'. It was at this time that Clemo first announced his acceptance of the Calvinist doctrine of election. Writing of his faith he said, 'I believe in a God Who died and rose again for the redemption of a certain number of people'. This doctrinal position was to receive elaboration in *The Invading Gospel*,(3) but cannot be said to have changed in any important way in the nearly twenty years that divide these professions of faith, or in the years since then.

It was about this time that Clemo seems to have acquired the attitude towards nature characteristic of *The Map of Clay*, or more particularly, *The Clay Verge*. For while his first volume of autobiography speaks of his childhood 'queer dislike of flowers', many of his juvenile poems(4) display no such antipathy. But two weeks after the proclamation of faith quoted above, he wrote that:

A sanely cheerful philosophy comes from contemplation and  
acceptance of truths which are indeed far removed from the  
world of politics, but also far removed from the world of  
nature. Natural law is nothing apart from supernatural law.  
The law that makes spring follow winter is useless without the

1. See, for example, the remark '...Calvinism is a statement of how Christianity works...[while] fellowship rests on an agreement as to what Christianity is', *Gospel*, p.61.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.51-59. 3. *Ibid.*, p.115ff. 4. See following chapter.



law that makes salvation follow sin. The law that creates a  
daffodil is meaningless, even monstrous and melancholy, apart  
from the law that creates a prayer. Unless optimism is founded  
upon the unseen it is certain to be shattered by things seen.

The above does not in any way match the ferocity of *The Clay Verge*. It indicates no strongly negative attitude towards nature, only a requirement that appreciation of the visible be tempered by gratitude for the invisible. But it does mark the beginnings of a clear position *vis a vis* nature, one that was to develop continually throughout Clemo's life. So that we find that even while Clemo was pleased to have the opportunity via *The Invading Gospel*, (eight years after the influence of Eileen Funston had seen the last of the poems in his immediate post-war style) to moderate the vision of the natural world articulated in *The Clay Verge*,<sup>(1)</sup> he could still speak of the 'revolutionary effects' this theology must have upon nature.<sup>(2)</sup> Nor was he averse in the body of this volume to repeat his preference for machinery and industrial squalor.<sup>(3)</sup>

The position Clemo was to adopt in *The Invading Gospel* undoubtedly owed something to his reading of Karl Barth. For where Barth was inclined to speak of oppositional forces - divine and profane - Clemo speaks of warfare and invasion. Compare for example the imagery of 'invasion' employed by Clemo in his Preface with the following by Barth: '...in the world there is opposition to the love of God, indeed this opposition constitutes the very being of the world as such'.<sup>(4)</sup> Clemo's imagery and attitude towards nature in *The Invading Gospel* is certainly closer to Barth than it is to Calvin who was capable of writing in his *Opera omnia quae supersunt*:

For the little birds sang of God, the animals acclaimed  
him, the elements feared him and the mountains resounded with him,

1. In the Preface he wrote: 'In my poetry I have often made religious use of the imagery of Cornish clayworks with their constant blasting and excavating. In the present volume Christian truth is portrayed as an invasion... This image leaves more room for the area of free-will'. 2. *Gospel*, p.7. 3. *Ibid.*, p.85.  
4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2,2, Edinburgh, 1957, p.26.

the rivers and springs threw glances towards him, the  
grasses and the trees smiled,(1)

This quotation, which is not at all atypical, shows Calvin much closer to an acceptance of natural theology than either Barth or Clemo, and suggests that the ascription of 'Calvinist' to Clemo's poetic vision while acceptable by common conceptions of an often ignominious term, is theologically suspect with regard to Clemo's theologically motivated 'hatred of beauty' ('Neutral Ground', *The Clay Verge*). Clemo's position is Barthian, rather than Calvinist. Barth never achieved a compromise between his 'positivism of revelation' and natural theology.(2) Clemo's attitude towards nature was to change. It constitutes one of the few aspects of Clemo's thinking and vision, possibly the only one, which has suffered continual shifts and adjustments. Of these changes, however, the letters cannot speak, as they were written during the first stage of Clemo's rejection of natural theology.

The letters written in the first years of the war were to be Clemo's last sallies in this genre. With the publication of *Wilding Graft* Clemo abandoned his interest in letters to the press. He had achieved the national, and international, audience he wanted for his vision.

1. *Opera omnia quae supersunt*, 9, 793 and 795; quoted in Francois Wendel's *Calvin*, Glasgow, 1965, p.161.

2. Gabriel Vahanian in his Introduction to Barth's *The Faith of the Church* draws attention to Barth's inability to excise his fear of natural theology, London, 1960, p.18.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### INSPIRATION

Clemo's juvenile poetry spans the years from 1930 to 1945. (1) From this period some eighty poems have survived. For Clemo, subsequent to the publication of *Wilding Graft* and *Confession of a Rebel*, his entire poetic output was to be published as 'a sort of appendix to my *Confession*, throwing more direct light on my spiritual odyssey'. (2) C. Day Lewis, then reader for Chatto & Windus, cut the projected volume severely, a decision Clemo later regretted - the volume sold only one hundred and eighty copies and made his Calvinism appear too austere. (3)

If at this time Clemo saw his poetry as merely an appendix to autobiography this was because, with one novel published and others making the rounds, he saw himself as a novelist, not poet. (4) Indeed, in *Confession* he writes of the immediate post-war poetry as a fascinating but temporary phenomenon. (5) Time seems to have reversed that judgment. If Clemo is to be remembered at all it is more likely to be as a poet who happened to write excellent autobiography and a couple of novels. And it is as a poet that his juvenile work acquires its interest; even though, save for a dozen poems and the occasional line, Clemo's juvenile verse shows little connection with the later work. It would appear, as Clemo himself expresses it that he woke up one day a poet. (6) In part this may

1. Unless otherwise indicated poems and other Clemo material quoted in this chapter are from manuscript material made available to the author. In 1981 a number of Clemo's manuscripts were purchased by Exeter University and are housed in the University Library. The manuscripts were still awaiting cataloguing in August, 1988. 2. Unpublished preface to the projected *The Clay Verge*, found amongst Clemo's papers. 3. Lewis had secured the publication of *Wilding Graft*, and had worked with Clemo on alterations to his first volume of autobiography. Lewis took the editorial decisions on poems to appear in *The Clay Verge*; letter to the author; see also, *Marriage*, p.66. 4. This is very evident in the unused Preface already mentioned. 5. *Confession*, p.222. 6. *ibid.*, p.221.

be explained by the fact that it was through poetry that he mainly exercised his flirtation with Romanticism, (1) while his novels rehearsed, as only the novel form allowed, the consummation of the destiny he had started to believe awaited him. (2) In part also it is due to a lack of interest in or commitment to the form. While he was prepared to seek out Browning's poetry and study it intently (if as prophecies not as poems) his knowledge of English poetry as a whole was gleaned almost entirely from the two encyclopedias bought during the thirties, neither of which offered him the opportunity seriously to engage with issues of poetic form and style. And if he did wake one day a poet, it was as a result of two years of deep immersion in the poetry of Francis Thompson; whom he valued for other reasons. (3)

Clemo's juvenile poetry may be divided into three groups: the early thirties Celtic poems; the main body of poems published locally; and the poems that remained in manuscript form only. The first group were written over a three year period and reflect his flirtation with the Cornish Movement. Clemo was, if only for a while, fiercely nationalistic:

Cornwall, Cornwall, thou mystic land,  
In spirit far removed  
From England's life;  
Thou'rt steeped in legends,,,memories  
Of ages past;  
And in thy sons at times dim echoes stir  
Of slumbering chords, to others dim, unheard.

(*Cornish Guardian*, 11th May, 1933)

That he felt an attraction for things Celtic is evident also from the ballads he wrote. The following is from 'The Legend of Hellenclose':

1, *ibid.*, p.126. 2, *ibid.*, p.74. 3, See present paper, Chapter Eight.



'A storm-wild night; a fierce wind roaming free;  
The lighted Hall, close to the fretful sea,  
Where the young lord feasted with a merry company,  
Such was the scene, that festive wedding night,  
When fate on Hellenclose hurled forth its spite.

(from *Doidge's Annual*, 1934)

The vast bulk of the poetry Clemo wrote at this time has little interest even for the student of Clemo's work, except to provide evidence of a time prior to *The Clay Verge* when Clemo happily equated God, love and nature. In 'Spring Night' written in 1935 he concluded a description of the night sky with these words about the stars which, the poem said,

shed glow  
So pure and fearless that I know  
God's world tonight is mine, and love's,

(from *Cornish Guardian*, 1st June, 1935)

There is a touching sweetness of feeling here; a sensitivity soon to be severely disciplined. Speaking of the years immediately prior to his discovery of Browning Clemo has said:

when walking through the fields in Spring I would often go yards out of my way to avoid treading on a patch of daises or buttercups,,,but I knew,,,If I didn't get a hard grip on my reactions I should soon be shedding tears because the "dear little daises" would be gone so quickly,(1)

Such sentimentalism is surprising, and probably owes more to his feelings for Evelyn Philips than to his feelings towards nature. Clemo has admitted his total indifference to it and his need to consult the *Children's Encyclopedia* should he ever need to introduce specific facets of 'nature' into his writing. (2) This is supported by the poems of this time which

1. Clemo, *Unicorn*, 2, *Confession*, p.200; see also Appendix One.

refer to the natural world in the most general of terms only: summer, breeze, frost, stars, 'leaf-garbed trees'. Within weeks of commencing his serious study of Browning Clemo was imitating what Hereford calls Browning's passion for 'swift and sudden upheavals and catastrophes...the excesses' of nature, (1) as can be seen by the following 1935 poem:

O gloom and wild thunder  
That, one with my nature,  
I revelled in - tempest  
Combatted, depriving,  
With strength given for striving,  
Its fury of plunder -  
Rude battle-force, wader  
Of conflict for gain - lest  
Without thy sure testing my soul, quest resigning,  
Seeks ease in false comfort of song and sun-shining -  
Leave me with thy spirit, life's purpose enshrining,  
(from *Cornish Guardian*, 6th April, 1935)

Significant here too is the notion of spiritual struggle against Romantic absorption in nature, a belief that Clemo has indicated he identified in Browning's *La Saisiaz*. (2) Several poems published in the mid thirties suggest Clemo was consciously imitating Browning, particularly the latter's syntactic violence:

What of old year's record this night ends, we furnished?  
Soiled each day! But look again,  
See, already fade the mischievous foul markings...  
(from *Cornish Guardian*, 4th March, 1937)

Browning's stylistic oddities are not greatly evident in Clemo's juvenile verse. Their occasional appearance indicates that Clemo was not subject

1, C.H. Hereford, *Robert Browning*, London, 1905, p.64. 2, *Confession*, p.129.



to the kind of struggle against a strong predecessor poet which Harold Bloom has written about with regard to other poets.(1) In fact, serious engagement with Browning coincided with a lessening of interest in poetry and greater concentration upon the novel.

This brings us to the third group of poems, the dating of which is, for the most part, less certain. A remark in *Confession* suggests that these poems should be dated either before 1939 or after January 1945.(2) The poetry that followed on from 'Christ in the Clay-pit' is of a piece stylistically and on the strength of this stylistic evidence poems which do not share any of these stylistic characteristics are probably earlier works. If this is correct then Clemo's papers when I examined them contained seventeen poems written before 1945 which have not been published. They are the most interesting of his juvenile poetry, offering us an early poetic insight into Clemo's twin struggles with religion and sex. Beyond this they indicate that in some of the juvenile poems Clemo was, consciously or otherwise, already reaching towards the complex of conceptual and symbolic oppositional terms that he was later to make uniquely his own.

Clemon has complained of misreadings of his work where erotic imagery had been employed to convey spiritual experience. (3) It is a problem mystics complain of. But Clemon, as I have already indicated, was not a mystic. His drive, from the start, was for actual, earthly, *sacramentalized* marriage. Neither, I think, can these poems be attributed to that period of paganism more imaginary than real that Clemon makes insistent reference to. For 'pagan' may as comfortably mean, in his autobiographical literature, 'instinctive affirmation of life', (4) 'intoxication akin to the erotic', (5) or vitality (6). There was, to some extent, as Clemon has identified himself, an attempt to press Christian

1, Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, London, 1973. 2, *Confession*, p.221. 3, *Marriage*, p.28.  
4, *Gospel*, p. 10. 5, *ibid.*, p.15. 6, *ibid.*, p.51.

symbols 'into the service of hedonism'. (1) This much is evident in 'A Shrine in Springtime'. It is a poetic presentation of a vision, the last stanza of which reads:

A forehead, thorn-crested,  
Lips lifted, blood- stained,  
Hands nail-pierced, that rested  
Upon me, constrained,...  
Then - no more mere vision, but flesh that I claim  
In life's purpose attained.

In others, the opposition between Christianity and sexual delight more directly reflects Clemo's difficulty:

Is He afraid earth-sparks would foul His lip  
In that great hour when we together cling...

Poems such as this one, titled 'Midnight of the Flesh', appear to draw some of their imagery from Browning. For example:

...I ascend the fountain steps to dip  
My torch in waters whence the rainbow springs.

Torch that now sears my vitals...

is a likely borrowing from *Christmas Eve*:

And why count steps through eternity?  
But love is the ever springing fountain;  
Man may enlarge or narrow his bed  
For the water's play, but the water head -  
How can he multiply or reduce it? (2)

1. *Gospel*, p.13. 2. *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol.1, London, 1897.



The image of a rainbow is also to be found in *Christmas Eve*. But when the debt (if it exists in this poem) to Browning is acknowledged 'Midnight of the Flesh' reads still as a scarcely worked upon wet-dream.

It is in poems of this kind, however, that there are glimpses of the symbolic oppositions Clemo was to refine into his own unique aesthetic; oppositions which required difficult discriminations. In this poem, for example, 'earth-sparks' is not paradigmatically related to 'Nature', but fails to form part of a coherent binary opposition. We are told:

...Nature still  
Glares with the greedy glint of lecherous fire,

The opposition between 'earth-sparks' and 'Nature' is not sufficiently clear here. The 'girl-phantom' of the poem - the means by which his 'lecherous fire' will be quenched - is also an *earth-spark*, and at the same time an enemy of both nature and Christ; for Christianity is to be consumed along with nature upon a pyre that presumably is, simultaneously, 'Nature's...lecherous fire':

Your breasts are rounded into Calvary's hill,  
And 'gainst the sky His Cross is on the pyre.

But Clemo still has recourse to the super-imposition of breast upon hill symbolically to establish the spiritual significance of the love the poem articulates.

The weaknesses of this poem do not deserve to be judged critically. What is of interest is the way a poem such as this one presages, in inchoate form, many aspects of Clemo's mature, immediate post-war work. The use of 'fire' here anticipates its use in 'Neutral Ground', the conflation of human anatomy and landscape is a recurring feature of his later work, and the dream scenario here portrayed was to be recast as an

erotico-theological 'composition of place' (1) in 'A Calvinist in Love'.

More successful was 'A Meditation'. In this juvenile poem Clemo seeks and sustains a theological justification for the spirituality with which he invests femininity:

Lord, when You came as man to earth  
A girl brought You, and in the birth  
Within my soul of Yours, a part  
Was owed to female flesh.

Written at the latest in 1936, (2) this opening sentence skilfully controls two separate yet related phenomena, and creates, thereby, a metaphysical conceit of genuine merit. Clemo, probably less than twenty at the time, was unlikely to have encountered more than a small number of anthologized Metaphysical poems. The debt here is, at least directly, to Browning's syntax, for it is certain that he did not discover John Donne until 1949. (3) His autobiographical works do not make reference at all to other important Metaphysicals. The effort to slough traditional connotations from the word 'nature' is evident in the redrafting of this poem where 'beyond delights' is substituted for 'Of all Your gifts':

I saw a love like Your love, best  
*beyond delights thro' nature given,...*  
(my italics)

In the second half of the poem femininity becomes a bridge 'Twixt Heaven and the protoplasm' and thereby the legitimate source for rejection of 'the grim/ Cold weight of creed-stones lying dim/ In churches...' It was this element within this poem and others, the individualistic attempt to reject the historical reality of the established churches, that Clemo later came

1, The term is taken from Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, London, 1962. 2, Dated by indirect evidence in *Gospel*, see pp. 13-14. 3, Letter to the author,



to realise could lead him only to *impasse*. (1) This realisation, however, was to come thirteen years later, and generate the second major shift in his poetic vision. The first stage, which was not satisfactorily accomplished until 1945, was to subordinate fantasy to Christian discipline. (2) A task, which, when one takes into account the enormous role fantasy was forced to play in his emotional life, was bound to prove an exacting one.

Clemo was unable during these years to find the right poetic symbols within which to express his Christian-erotic vision, even as it gradually stabilized during the later thirties. (3) That he had glimpses of it is established. But the 'spiritual key' he was to fashion out of 'the industrial features' (4) of his landscape did not, so far as poetry is concerned, happen until after the Second World War, after, that is, the two novels *The Shadowed Bed* and *Wilding Graft* had taught him how. The determination to retain both passion and the discipline of faith is the theme of the mid-thirties poem titled, 'Prayer for those in Love', from which the following lines are taken.

Creeds grow cold above  
Passion's reach;  
Christ of creeds and love  
Stoop and teach  
Passion how to kiss  
Without shame,

At times it seemed He never would and Clemo sought a lonely consolation in Calvinism:

Grant but the fulness of one word,  
And strength to bear the stigma -  
The sweetest word in language, Lord;  
Not 'Love' but 'Dogma'.

1, *Gospel*, p.107. 2, *ibid.*, p.13. 3, *ibid.*, p.29. 4, *ibid.*, p.10.

It may have been during these years that Clemo came to understand that faith, as he phrases it in *The Invading Gospel*, is about the surrender of the ego. (1) That he had, in Browning, a model for his marital and literary ambitions, clearly lent Clemo moral support as the frequent references to Browning in *Confession of a Rebel* testify.

That Browning had an influence upon Clemo's later poetry is very likely. That influence was not to be in terms of imitation of Browning's syntactic irregularities, the kind of superficial copying the younger Clemo engaged upon. Most importantly of all, Browning demonstrated to Clemo that one could be a good Protestant, and a Calvinist to boot, and write poetry without morally going off the rails. (2) It was not to be until three decades after Clemo had discovered Browning that Clemo would attempt what Drew has called Browning's 'counterfeiting the untidy workings of the human mind' (3) through digressions, broken trains of thought. Clemo's early poetry was thoroughly preoccupied with himself. Only gradually could he begin to extend the range of his art to include significant others, theological and literary figures who had played, through their published works, so important a part in his own development. Rarely, even, does Clemo's later work, the poetry of, for example, *A Different Drummer*, seek to emulate Browning's use of voice and gesture to undermine the credibility of his personas. One is never left in doubt, in a Clemo dramatic monologue, as to the status of the argument presented, as one finds oneself when reading Browning's *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, or *Mr Sludge, 'the Medium'*. (4)

With respect to faith it is equally arguable that Browning's influence is more perceived than actual. Browning's belief in the dialectical struggle between faith and doubt, his reification of the human will, (5) these things have no place in Clemo's work. His faith, that is, his

1. *Gospel*, p.19. 2. See for example, *Confession*, p.129.

3. Philip Drew, *The Poetry of Robert Browning*, London, 1970, p.118. 4. Browning, *Poetical Works*.

5. My understanding of Browning's theology is indebted to William Whittle, *op.cit.*



Christian faith, Clemo acquired from more reliable theological sources, like the great Charles Spurgeon. It was Clemo's private faith, the belief that he was predestinated for marriage, and that, as Browning wrote in *Pauline*, 'love is best' that developed out of his study of Browning: that, and as has already been indicated above, the confidence to believe that Calvinism could and should be turned into art.

The inchoate, unstable nature of Clemo's juvenile poetic vision is affirmed through the last surviving poem we have, called 'Impregnation', written early in December 1941. In this poem Clemo attempts to fashion out of the ocean a symbolic landscape through which he can articulate his 'erotic theology'. 'Palsied brine', 'weeds that weave', 'a net of death', 'sea-bed mire', 'bleached bones', 'storms'. 'seas of passion', 'tempests' and more are all packed into its fourteen lines. The poem did not work. Four years later his poetic voice was found, his symbolic landscape complete. But 'Impregnation' does serve to suggest, perhaps, that by this time Clemo was aware that he needed a topography within which to function poetically. He had found the right key by 1941 if not the right lock.

CHAPTER FOUR  
THE PATCHWORK NOVEL

From 1930 through to 1951 Clemo was engaged in writing fiction.(1) Just how many novels he wrote over the years it is impossible to calculate because of Clemo's method of generating the next out of the body of the previous one.(2) *Travail*, for example, completed in 1931, underwent several stages of alteration and title change before being submitted to Hutchinson's in June of 1933 as *A Star Shall Lead*. Rejected by them the following month it underwent minor alterations twice - with no more success - was partly rewritten during August and September, and when refused by Heath Grantock suffered further minor tinkering before being posted to Mills & Boon. Between December and February of the following year the manuscript underwent extensive revisions, was rejected, and then declined by J.M. Dent despite further minor adjustments. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1934 the manuscript was entirely rewritten, and retitled. Three further rejections followed, each causing Clemo to tinker further with his text. In the summer of 1935 it was rewritten again and retitled *Shame of thy Youth*. Three years, thirteen revisions (several of them extensive), and four titles later the book was scrapped. But very many scenes from this polymorphous work were incorporated into another novel *Unsunned Tarn*. Trying to demarcate novels in this endlessly shifting landscape of text is a hopeless task.

But one can trace the development of his literary skills, and the

1. Clemo's last refers to fictional composition in *Marriage* as being 'in the early months of 1949', see page 37. The frontispiece of *Penance of the Seed* has the words 'From which chapters 14, 16-23 of *The Dry Kiln* were drawn Oct 1950 - June 1951'. This could be the revised novel rejected by his agent in August 1951, *Marriage*, p.70. 2. This chapter is indebted to Jack Clemo who kindly gave me access to manuscript and typescript material; amongst this body of papers was a handwritten diary of dates recording his publishing attempts.



emergence of a literal and simultaneously symbolic landscape which has dominated his poetry since 1945. For while his pre-war poetry contains little indication of what was to follow, the novels mark the progress towards his mature vision.

The earliest surviving novel manuscripts which I could find were two handwritten versions of the same story. Both manuscripts show signs of reworking and carry three titles apiece. The 1931 manuscript has 'Second Version' written upon the front page. This novel was, evidently, rewritten twice over the next twelve months, for the next surviving manuscript written 1931-32 bears the legend 'Fourth Version'. They are substantially the same story, with the 'fourth version' extended to something like double the length of the earlier novel by the addition of minor characters and an attempt at a subplot: possibly additions made under the tutelage of Gordon Meggy. (1)

Like many a first novel it is derivative of Clemo's own experience, but not in any real sense autobiographical. Personal experience has been worked over until it takes the form of an independent fictional world. Clemo's own happy memories of the mornings he would ride in Harry Phillip's milk van, serve as the source of the heroine's (Gwinbren Poldhu) father's employment. Rather, than, as was Clemo when he met Evelyn Phillips, being afflicted with blindness, Jowan was afflicted with grief: the immediate event of a wedding ceremony becomes the very recently passed funeral. Tragedy becomes the opening for romance:

Perhaps it is an exaggeration to say that in direct consequence of Carlath's death came his relation with Gwinbren; but the two events are linked; there is a haze in which they unite; and it is from this haze that we hear Gwinbren saying softly -

'You'll get over it all right, Jowan...'

1. See *Confession*, pp. 78-79.

Gwinbren is described as approaching the grief-stricken youth;

...when she came to him, touched him, gazed down into his empty,  
troubled eyes and spake - something stirred,

Gwinbren's comforting gestures and words, recall those Clemo heard from the young Evelyn Phillips. (1) And what are Jowan's 'empty, troubled eyes' if not Clemo's memory of his own eyes that morning, blind and tortured beneath their bandages? Clemo has admitted the early novels were compensatory projections: 'The hero was always a portrait of myself, a solitary dreamer ridiculed by the villagers, but always vindicated at last by finding a lonely, unpopular girl of his own type'. (2)

With the above Clemo provides a reductionist account of his fictional work. There is truth in his remark, but it explains away rather than explains the novels. *March Dawn*, slight as it is, contains elements not necessary for the symbolic realisation of the then seventeen year old's desire for Evelyn Phillips. Besides which, if the mature Clemo reflecting upon that first and important romance is to be trusted his desire then was not, as in *March Dawn*, the simple, normal desire for physical union sanctified by marriage. Of his feeling for Evelyn Phillips Clemo has written:

Neither then nor later was I 'in love' with her in the ordinary sense, I felt for her that entirely unholy reverence, that 'desire of the moth for the star', which Christianity so roughly handles in its doctrine of original sin. I wanted only to live in the mingled bliss and agony of this creative fire, conscious of her, of fate lengthening the pattern towards some vague permanence untouched by the grossness of practical life, (3)

1. *Confession*, pp.62-63. 2. Letter to author. 3. *Confession*, p.83.



*March Dawn* shows nothing of this. The heroine is under the age of consent when she makes love with Jowan on her kitchen bench. The sexual act is implied rather than chronicled - 'Gwinren's fingers fumbled at his waist' signifies the entire act - and one only understands what happened through the heroine's subsequent pregnancy. But this is far from the idealized remembrance Clemo offers us in his autobiography. And then there is the matter of Carlath, Jowan's dead sister, whose ghostly presence is somehow meant to cleanse the lovers' physical act of its carnality.<sup>(1)</sup> In the novel her presence fails to do so, as the novel fails to rise above a simple realist account of a young village couple. If Clemo had idealistic notions to communicate, the novel shows no evidence of them.

The perpetual process of revision and rewriting necessitated deeper and deeper insight into his material. For Clemo remained committed to a core story: tragedy, or disappointment, brings his lovers together; family, or society, disapproval, forces them apart or threatens to; the star-crossed pair do not lose their faith in love (later on it will be the hero's Calvinist faith that is tested and rewarded with love) and are eventually reunited. It is a simple story, one that has furnished many a writer with the outline of a plot. That Clemo should make use of it, even repeatedly, is not significant. His embellishments are. The hero is always an unpopular, unsocial creature, indifferent to the opinion of the world and an employee of a local clayworks: the heroine is tomboyish, under-age and attracted by his kindness/suffering soul and/or integrity with which he has learnt to endure his alienation. Their immediate society - and Clemo's fictional world is as closely circumscribed as Jane Austen's, scarcely moving beyond the confines of two dozen clay workers' cottages and their occupants - engulfed in a morass of immorality, view this relationship with incomprehension, opposition and ultimately admiration. Not only does every novel Clemo wrote contain the same core story, each one marks a further milestone on the way to *Wilding Graft*. *Unsunned Tarn* constructs a double love story; that between Joel Kruse and Marvran Creba, and that between Euan Kella and Gwen Kruse. The double hero represents two stages in the development of the archetype Jowan Menavawr; Joel, a

1. *Confession*, p.80.



development, in terms of age and maturity, away from Jowan; while Euan Kella is a development towards Garth Joslin. To put it in the terminology of Barth, Euan Kella/Garth Joslin symbolize the 'elected' lovers, who behave with a consistency or integrity that comes from 'the role and task intended for them'. The task of giving witness to God's election, Barth says, cannot be contemplated as an abstraction: 'It can only be lived by them, and seen by others as it is lived by them.' (1) But since the 'rejected' is he who gives negative evidence of God's omnipotence-under-His-love, who chooses 'the joylessness of an existence that accords with his own pride', (2) and equally cannot contemplate his spiritual rejectedness *in abstracto*, but must give witness to his spiritual condition through the material-human failures of his life, (the inability, that is, to achieve personal goals) there appears no space for maneuver. The elect are elect, the rejected are (albeit self-) damning. What is required here is a third category, or type in whom the elect has his purpose. Barth's theology depends upon it:

The elect man is chosen in order that the circle of election - that is, the circle of those who recognise and confess Jesus Christ in the world - should not remain stationary or fixed, but open and enlarge itself, and therefore grow and expand and extend. What is given him in his election and calling is undoubtedly the task not to shut but to open, not to exclude but to include, not to say No but Yes to the surrounding world; just as he himself is undoubtedly one to whom it was opened, who was included, to whom Yes was said... (3)

This theological imperative is the rationale for the retention of the non-religious Jowan Menavawr - in whatever avatar - after the appearance of the Calvinist hero in Clemo's novels: expansion of the circle of the elect. (4) If the novels then are explicable in terms of Barthian theology

1, Barth, *op.cit.*, p.341. 2, *ibid.*, p.449-50. 3, *ibid.*, p.419. 4, Clemo's heroes are all projections of himself; their variation comes from Clemo's use of his own perception of himself at different stages of theological development.



we must not be dissuaded by the fact that Clemo had not read Barth at this time. Barth's elaboration of the Reformation doctrine of election was the direction in which he was ineluctably moving. This claim is lent support by the nature of the impact Barth was to have upon Clemo. The 'earthquake of a book' (Clemo refers here to Barth's *Romans*) 'shook' him(1) because it so fully articulated what Clemo already knew at the intuitive and existential level. Because Barth provided confirmation rather than insight Clemo had no need to read further than *Romans*.(2)

Clemon worked and reworked his 'core' story, and by 1937 seems to have reached his goal, a satisfactory representation of himself and his theological role in relation to God and the world. The sense of having arrived is reflected in his autobiography.

A note of wondering gratitude was dominant in my diary entries through the winter of 1937-38. There was a serenity, a sense of ripeness and completeness that often felt like a benediction...The more I nourished this simplicity of belief and emotional response, the more balanced and 'tough-minded' I became intellectually.(3)

The theological understanding he had reached was still subject to movement. As has been shown in Chapter One Eileen Funston was instrumental in making him rethink his spiritual symbols and reconsider his isolation. Barth also played a part with regard to this latter point, so that the verse:

'Better be crazed with isolating fear  
Than sane in brotherhood's pale unity;  
Stronger than team-work is the lonely tear;  
Greater than fellowship is agony.'

1. *Gospel*, p.107. 2. When consulted on this point Clemon informed me that he had only attempted to read one other work by Barth, failed to finish it and had not bothered to investigate Barth any further; letter to the author. 3. *Confession*, p.143.



penned in 1950 was to be the last expression of intense Christian individualism. For, what he gained from Barth, during his reading of Romans, in 1949-50, was a clear theological insistence that Christian faith has as much to do with the body of Christ in the Church as it does with individual belief.

Recognition of the centrality of theology enables us to better appreciate Clemo's heroes, their attitude towards women and the immorality of the villagers which, increasingly after 1933, provides the corrupt atmosphere within which the dramas are played out. If, for example, we take the 1937 novel *Unsunned Tarn*, we encounter almost from the first page a sleazy preoccupation with sexual promiscuity on the part of the villagers. Joel Kruse, the novel's hero, is teased by his mother for his regard of his sister Gwen: Martha Kruse suggests it is an obscene regard: "'Falling in love wi' yer sister, I reckon - nobody else won't look at 'ee...Here, maid, go over an' kiss'n'". Later on in the novel, after the Kruse's roof has been taken off in a storm, she attempts to persuade Gwen to share a bed with Joel and twelve year old Arthur Kruse. Mrs Kruse clearly takes delight in the possibilities such a sleeping arrangement would provide. Both parents have a fascination with the sexual opportunities that present themselves (in their minds, not in Gwen's) to their daughter. Having discovered that the unemployed Gwen has taken to visiting the claywork lodges (huts in which the labourers eat their lunches and seek shelter from the elements) during the daytime Zachary Kruse dismisses the idea that as there would have been several men present there would be 'a bit more safety in numbers'. The deciding factor for him would have been whether the men were 'decent sorts'. If they had not been then, he says: "'Next thing we knowed, maid might ha' gone off to Bodmin and come home wi' new clothes, leaving us to guess where she got the money'". Without any sense of the insult he pays his daughter he speaks of "'That lodge'", that is, the lodge just referred to, as becoming in the future "'as famous a spot on the landscape as Olive Buzza's house'". (Olive Buzza is the local prostitute.) Gwen's parents can simultaneously speculate on the possibility of their fourteen year old daughter having prostituted herself to a gang of workmen and recognise that 'She may be "'ruined "'



by falling in love '"wi' some chap"'. To the Kruses it is one and the same thing. This may reflect a distortion consequent upon his mother's revelations to him: it may, just as likely have been based upon knowledge of local conditions. In October 1933 he 'impeached' Cornish villages for the very activities his novels were to dramatize:

...with village life I am well acquainted and a love of truth  
compels me to repudiate the suggestion of your reviewer. There  
are villages that are hot-beds of immorality, where so-called  
pleasure covers a multitude of sins, and children have upon their  
memories scenes which 'hell itself would shudder at'.

(from *Cornish Guardian*)

The Kruses, at least the parents, are types of the rejected. Assisted in material matters by the chapel-going Crebas, they nonetheless fail to rise above the grime which colours all their actions and thoughts. Enduring a self-inflicted regime of poverty, filth, abuse and violence, Mr. and Mrs Kruse give clear evidence that, in a perverse way, they desire no other. Challenged by Joel after yet another ugly scene, from which Joel has saved Gwen from a beating, Mrs Creba retorts: '"Why - what's wrong with our life here...Me and Zacky do shove along in it well enough"'. To speak of the Kruses as 'types of the rejected' is to imply allegory: to do so would be to mislead. While all the characters in *Unsunned Tarn* are types the word here is used in a way that is closer to Lukacs's 'typical'. This is most evident with respect to Olive Buzza. Olive, in her teens suffered the loss of her mother. Five years later her father was involved in a clayworks accident that blinded him, wrecked him physically and damaged his mental faculties. His condition terrifies her. To Olive, her father is:

Like a child, and like a monster - a groping, raw human energy  
bottled in the wasted frame, straining to grasp the lost social-  
izing elements. He hardly ever spoke, and she would sometimes be

frightened as she sat with him, feeling the dark abnormal power of his thoughts. Nothing else remained; nothing escaped [from] him by sight, by speech, and the thoughts grew more and more strange.

Afraid when at home it is hardly surprising that she seeks the warmth and affection to be found in someone's arms. Without a source of income, she puts to good use the one thing she possesses that has economic value - her body, and thus combines emotional and material gratification in a single act. Her sexual appetite is insatiable. When one of her customers half-jokingly proposes marriage she replies '"Hardly darling...I'd wring you dry in a month"'. Were it not for figures like Euan Kella and the authorial interventions *Unsunned Tarn* (and Clemo's other unpublished novels) would read as social-realist or naturalistic texts. The following is an example of intervention, in which Clemo as author comments upon one of the female characters:

All the flippancy, swagger and sophistication - mere paint and polish! Her being bedrock moulded from the elements of stark nature, could not be so easily changed. Underlying the modern jazz-rhythms that seemed to insure her against too strenuous a reality the tenacious instinct had persisted, schooled in the simple loyalties of the earth.

This is characteristic of Clemo's unpublished novels and a trait which firmly establishes the alliance between author and central male characters who have a tendency to speak in similar fashion. Characters like Euan Kella, the sub-plot's leading man (to be promoted to the main plot in *Wilding Graft*) are far removed from the world they inhabit, yet so much sons of its soil, they hold for the novel's other characters the fascination of an enigma. The reader is introduced to Kella in the following way:



Euan seemed now to be a common labourer, wearing rough clay-smeared clothes; only the intellectual cast of his features hinted that behind him lay a tale of misguided aims, a downfall that had infected with growing bitterness other lives not as serene and fatalistic as his.

He is 'serene and fatalistic', a misfit who knows that to be so is a necessary role for one who possesses 'the truth' because it is human society that is out of joint. In his words, 'It shows what a price has got to be paid if a fellow is to stand for reality against the fashionable humbug of the moment'. His integrity is the result of personal struggle, Puritanism winning out finally over more superficial attractions:

Towards culture as such he had developed the attitude of the average manual labourer. A mere handful of books - possibly a dozen out of the hundreds he had read - survived for him when his wayward personality had flowered. He still had modern moods in which he relished jazz music on the radio and found pleasure in Surrealist art, but from these he turned, without the slightest sense of incongruity, to Calvin's *Institutes*. It was this odd combination that made him such a misfit everywhere.

Euan 'had come to see the value and meaning of things through his individual temperament,' - coupled with his reading of favourite texts, amongst which we find Browning mentioned. His life is evidence of the reality of a struggle against 'The teaching of churches vaguely drifting with the social conscience [of the day]'. And, for Euan, as for his creator, Clemo, 'only a satisfactory marriage could prevent his spirit from hardening into misanthropy'.

This misfit serves as a fulcrum. Although 'cut off from fellowship' and 'unpopular with girls', and mocked as a cuckold when Lela Skiddy courts another behind his back, he is gradually perceived by the book's other characters as possessing something they themselves lack and desperately

need. By the end of the novel he demonstrates a consistency, and integrity that subverts the values of the claywork villages, revealing them to be misfitted to a universe that operates according to laws they had never comprehended.

The failure of his romance with Lela Skiddy - a romance began before the commencement of the novel's narrative - is the spiritual testing enacted in the novel. The integrity of his values is put to the test when Lela, returned from her job in St Austell, attempts to win him back again. But Euan senses that her residence in 'town' has aggravated tendencies that have long troubled him. She has now become '"a modern girl"', a creature '"cold and slick"'. Her attempted seduction is bound to fail:

He felt, as he looked at her, a physical repugnance, The pale, flat-cheeked face, theatrical as usual under a cocked green hat, the thin body poised with easy swagger - both repelled, irritated, There was nothing about her alluring, nothing desirable - for him,

Surface glitter communicates a corresponding emotional shallowness:

'These "progressive" ideas have filtered through into conduct and bogged up all the spontaneous impulses. Moderns won't let spiritual forces twist and batter them into real characters if they can help it. They try to dodge spiritual moods in the bustle of being good citizens.'

It is this emptiness that Euan senses in Lela Skiddy. Lela later tries to seduce the novel's hero, Joel Kruse, but Joel has become friendly with Euan and learnt a new set of values from him and similarly rejects her.

If Lela serves as typical of the kind of sexuality the novel disapproves of, the fifteen year old dishevelled Gwen Kruse, Joel's sister, is her ideological opposite:



The tattered dirty clothes,, the stockings wrinkled about her shoes below long brown legs, accentuated the impression of something lawless, pent, disordered in the ripening figure. Her hair was not cut short, but tumbled about her face that was dark and ageing with the prisoned fires of adolescence. The eyes were large, dark grey, heavy-lidded, the nose tilted slightly at the point; the mouth was broad, with full lips now apart, showing small, irregular teeth, (1)

Gwen, a mixture of street-urchin and sex-kitten, provides a combination of attractions Euan Kella finds difficult to resist, despite a lingering sense of obligation towards Lela.

A tigerish intensity again rippled through her, tautening her body where the young flux of sex became suddenly to Euan a real, potent wave colouring his reaction. Warned of the danger he rose, moving stiffly, confusedly off the bridge.

Culturally, emotionally, Gwen is a primitive:

Her thoughts of Euan when, having slowly undressed, she lay with Ruth among the tattered and dirty pile of bedclothes, had nothing of the cold realism and hard physical obsession which, in popular novels,(2) are said to afflict the modern girl. But they had even less kinship with the reactions of the daintier type of romantic heroine who is "in love" with idealistic disregard of sex...Her squalid life here at home...had prepared her for a blind and headlong surrender to the knowledge that now

1. There is a *slight* resemblance between Clempo's heroines and those of some of Hall Caine's, for example, Glory Quayle in *The Christian*, London, 1899. 2. Lawrence writes of the Chatterleys that they, 'were attached to one another, in the aloof modern way', London, 2nd ed. 1961.

smote her body...Gwen possessed the subdued, rather sullen nature of the primitive; nothing of the facile gaiety of the civilized. Her imagination focused and burned upon Euan...She defined and considered nothing rationally...

Primitiveness, a raw quality, hewed like the clay out of the surroundings, firmly establishes itself as the moral motif of the novel. It is, for example, when Joel Kruse overhears this epithet applied to Marvran Creba by her cousin Joan Luke, that he regains the confidence he needs to pursue her in the face of her own uncertainties. It was Marvran's *primitiveness* that had been threatened by her sojourn in Falmouth.

This quality is seen increasingly after 1935 to permeate the fictional landscape of his novels. Already implicated in the oppositional pair 'town/village', the landscape acquires increasing significance. For some characters, like Joel Kruse, the unique landscape is taken for granted. But the reader is made aware of its influence upon him:

Joel did not look at the moon; the weird shadows blackening  
in the chasm-like depths made no impression upon his senses.  
Even the uncanny quiet brooding there was meaningless to him,  
The atmosphere was natural to the place; it was natural to Joel,  
His character had been moulded by these surroundings.

For others, like Gwen, it has the nature of a cipher, a disguised writing, that tantalizes because it hints at meanings that cannot be grasped:

Beside one of the farmsteads she saw a man with a lantern  
slowly moving towards a barn. No other human but herself  
seemed to be abroad. A melancholy stillness brooded over the  
earth, broken only by the lisping wind and the splash of white  
coarse water in the micas nearby...



The flight of a bird is incorporated into a scene to give something of the quality of an objective correlative - although its function is, in fact, explicitly stated: 'The scream of a hawk wheeling overhead seemed ominous.'

With the central characters, cipher becomes signifier, with a signification that, may, according to temperament, be warmly accepted as it is by Euan Kella, or, as by others, opposed:

She had inherited her father's love of nature, but during  
the last year had lost contact,...Roche Rock, and those sand-  
hills glittering on the downs - queer contrast! Study in  
black and white, with the bare brown-grey background, The  
earth here was stern and majestic, suggestive of the infinite...  
Marvran was unaccustomed to such thoughts, She felt something  
within her resist the influence, something modern that wished  
to be free and false and cheap; the spirit of an age self-  
conscious before the Eternal Mood,

One is reminded of Lawrence here, whose characters ruminate metaphysically, and whose landscapes are incorporated into a system of values shared by some of the novel's characters. With respect to Lawrence, Alldritt has described the tendency as the co-opting of the 'phenomenal world' so that 'setting, character and story embody private concerns'.<sup>(1)</sup> Certainly there is overlap between Clemo's and Lawrence's heroes. One is aware of similarity between Euan Kella and Lawrence's Annable, a man who 'hated any sign of culture'. In Paul Morel, who 'saw' the Lord in the slag heaps and pit flares of his home environment, Lawrence seems to have anticipated the poetic persona Clemo would adopt after the Second World War. And both writers believed in a reality anterior to the phenomenal world which it was the writer's task to reveal. For both authors sex was very problematic and needed to be profoundly integrated into spiritual considerations.

1, Kenneth Alldritt, *The Visual Imagination of D.H. Lawrence*, London, 1965, p.234.

We know that Clemo, shocked by the sexual content of the Lawrence he had read refused to read him again after about 1934, (1) and did not return to Lawrence until 1948. (2). These facts, combined with no knowledge of how extensively or intensively Clemo read Lawrence between 1930 and 1934 make it impossible to speak of influence with certainty, but that he influenced Clemo to some degree does seem more than likely.

Clemo's drive towards the symbolic, towards revealing a spiritual reality behind material existence is even more noticeable in the sequel to *Unsunned Tarn*, called *Penance of the Seed*, which would appear to have been written sometime between 1939 and 1941. Remarkably similar to the earlier book, the heroes of *Unsunned Tarn* look on like wise elders at the younger Bryn's struggle for the right kind of marriage. What is different about the later book is the fact that its increased length - an additional one hundred and forty pages - is almost entirely taken up with authorial interjections. (3) Clemo's intellectual enemies - the liberal church (represented here by the character Vincent Penhaligon), and 'social philosophy' - are mercilessly hammered. 'God Almighty' is brought into the novel, in opposition to 'the church' and seen, through the living evidence of the exemplary characters, to convert the most unpromising material - Olive Buzza and Charlie Crago. Discovering the body of Cal Mannell, who had taken his own life, Olive suddenly discovers Charlie behind her and about to make an attempt on her life. At this critical juncture she suddenly discovers that there is an alternative to the wretched existence she and Charlie have endured:

1, Dated by his letters to the *Cornish Guardian*, 2, *Marriage*, p.38.

3, A similar phenomenon occurs in Lawrence's redrafts, notably in the three versions of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; much of the increased length of *John Thomas and Lady Jane* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is due to ideological and didactic matter.



Olive frowned, then nodded slowly.

'Ah, yes - Euan and Cal! You told me once I ought to try  
and marry one or the other of them. You see what happens  
when they're thrown into a straight fight over someone else;  
virtue triumphs, doesn't it, showing us the way out... Shall  
we take the chance - own up we've been on the wrong track?  
We couldn't choose a better time.'

Later on Charlie stabs her to death in brutal fashion. Their story demonstrates, however, that the 'circle of election' is open to all, even the most morally wretched who are sure to damn themselves.

In some respects it is the Olive Buzzas and Charlie Cragos of these early novels that redeem them. For while 'primitivism', a contemptuous disregard for social propriety, refinement, comfort, etc. is the moral motif of all Clemo's novels it is bound in a contradiction with regard to the most important characters, who, for reasons personal to the author, must remain without taint. Clemo's heroes and heroines remain not only remarkably pure sexually, they act with the utmost decorum at all times. They are not so much primitives as just plain odd, a consequence of the novelist not having sufficient artistic independence from the ideology he seeks to articulate. The central characters lack scope. Bryn's 'primitivism' is restricted to taking his dates to worked-out clay quarries, in preference to more congenial locations. His behaviour with them there would satisfy the most morally fastidious of readers. It is only in the Buzzas and Cragos that the reader gets to glimpse the meaning of Clemo's Christian primitivism: a simple, crude faith strengthened by a contempt for social norms and niceties:

She flicked her hand towards the lodge, edging the other arm  
further round his neck, 'That old shanty where Cal was brought  
in It just fits our mood, and 'twould stamp it on our minds so

we'd never forget...our new born love there where he lay dead...'  
She embraced him hungrily, pressed close, poised for a kiss...  
'Shall we go in there?...' :  
Her kiss came now, stabbing wet and slack upon his cold mouth, so  
that he staggered. She knew from the dazed helpless look on his  
face that he could make no resistance, and gave a low coarse  
laugh as she added:  
'After all, it does a marriage good to get outside the bedroom  
sometimes - lets the fresh air in...'  
She drew him a few steps down the bank, then pushed ahead over the  
trampled ferns towards the open doorway,

*Penance of the Seed*, if I am right in my dating of it, was completed at the close of 1941.(1) Within a month Clemo was engaged in the writing of another novel, *Wilding Graft*. That the novel 'came freely and needed little revision'(2) was probably more due to its ten year rehearsal than specific inspiration. And while Clemo records in his autobiography research conducted amongst the neighbour villages, it was, in reality, in order to be able to place the same or similar scenes in different locations. Names of characters were changed, as, indeed, were many scenes. Fundamentally, it remains the same narrative, with the occasional scene lifted entire from an earlier version.

For all that it is a book in its own right. If the numerous earlier novels are evident, *Wilding Graft* has that elusive stamp of authority. A fact Clemo seems to have sensed at once:

I had now, at the close of 1941, reached the point at which the  
processes of my inner life could be concreted in a novel with some  
fidelity to the truth...My artistic powers had matured and were ready  
to deal with this complexity,(3)

1. If I am in error, then it would have been finished a year earlier, and a lost manuscript written between early 1941 and January 1942; see *Confession*, p.199. 2. *Confession*, p.199. 3. *ibid.*, p.198.



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CHAPTER FIVE  
AN EXPERIMENT IN PRAYER

When Clemo began *Wilding Graft* in January 1942 it was, as we have noted, with a new sense of confidence, a sense of having reached the end of a long apprenticeship. Typically for Clemo it was apprenticeship without a master: or at least without any clear evidence of such influence. Then, in the autumn of 1941, Clemo 'saturated' himself, he says, 'in the essence of Hardy', (1) just prior to beginning his next novel, *Wilding Graft*. (2) There is, indeed, much in *Wilding Graft* that recalls Hardy. The sense of environment as absorbed wisdom, the complementary sense that the influence of landscape cannot be overcome - one thinks of Eustacia and Wildeve in *The Return of the Native*. *Wilding Graft*'s hero, Garth Joslin, can, in many ways, be seen as of the Hardy type, a misfit. In *Wilding Graft* as in Hardy's novels, 'the town' signifies corruption as much as it does sophistication. And in both writers a determined fate can be sensed ruling the characters' lives: in Hardy's case that fate is blind, indifferent; in contrast, in *Wilding Graft* it is controlled by a loving God. These shared characteristics should not too readily be explained by influence, for the previous chapter has demonstrated that Clemo had evolved this style by 1937-38. But Clemo's treatment of Truro cathedral is almost certainly a result of reading *Jude The Obscure*: the rest of the Hardy-esque elements were already a part of Clemo's literary style. Reviewers at the time of its publication inevitably greatly exaggerated Hardy's influence, having no knowledge of Clemo's earlier manuscripts.

*Wilding Graft* is concerned with the struggle between divine truth and secular delusion, dramatized through the differing fates of Garth Joslin, the novel's hero, and his spiritual opposite, Griffiths. It is to Clemo's

1. *Confession*, p.199. 2. On page 102 of *Confession*, Clemo notes that having been advised in 1933 to read Hardy, he refused.



credit that his skill in delineating his protagonists makes this philosophical battle credible in an otherwise realist novel. One accepts that while most people do not talk like Joslin and Griffiths, such people do exist and would speak in such a manner. But this is no mere intellectual disagreement of ideas. Both men have reached a critical moment in their lives, and see marriage as a way out. Garth has suffered rejection by his fiance and the ridicule of his village, over an incident five years earlier with Irma, the fifteen year old niece of a neighbour; (1) an incident which tipped his aged mother into insanity. Griffiths has known long-term unemployment, and a humiliating marriage followed by the death of his wife. Garth's free time has, for the passed five years, been spent picking up second-hand copies of theological books in Truro, a town he lingers in because it is more like London, to which Irma was hastily returned following the scandal. He waits until page two hundred and nine, when he learns that Irma is now living in Truro, and sets off upon a determined and systematic search. But it is to be Irma who finds Garth, appropriately within the cathedral, beside the altar. It is an apt place 'since the life they sought to consummate had been nourished by the truths acknowledged there'.

This relationship, which conforms to the pattern of 'elected' courtships traced in Clemo's previous manuscript novels, is in pointed contrast to Griffiths' affair with Minnie Lagor. The failure of this relationship is clearly attributed to his philosophy. Griffiths is 'a man of queer views, explosive speech - a firebrand, denouncing Capitalism and the Church and the whole cosmic scheme'. His intellectual interpretation of personal tragedy is the cause of his downfall. As the novel's narrator observes: 'His defiant reaction seemed to be the signal for the piling up of calamities'. This last remark is crucial to our reading of the novel, for it signifies Griffiths' distance from Joslin, and, of course, Clemo. While Griffiths interprets suffering materialistically and finds evidence of a cruel, meaningless world, the novel and its hero understand such events spiritually, as atonement, cleansing, testing. This difference

1. Clemo had initially had the girl, Irma, only twelve years of age, an age when, he believed, 'such a scandal could produce a permanent attachment...[in]...a highly sexed girl...', *Confession*, p.204.



serves as a touch-stone for each character's worth. Of Minnie Lagor Clemo writes that she '...had suffered, but she remained anchored to ideas that were trite, safe and commonplace. She scarcely regretted her position. She'd made a slip, but so had lots of others, and if they put up with it so could she. She bore no malice and was now, she hoped, no worse for her lapse'.

Minnie's desire to rescue Griffiths from himself is doomed to failure, as much as anything, because of the difference between them rehearsed above, another example, perhaps, of the inadvisability of beings 'unequally yoked together'. (1) The failure of the Griffiths/Lagor romance is the necessary obverse of the success of Garth's relationship with Irma. As Clemo has Garth say, ' "That bloke's just a symbol o' the unbelief we have triumphed over..." Griffiths' defeat is wrought with ironies, the most powerful one being his discovery that Garth's lover, Irma, is the daughter of Griffiths' wife by the man she had left Griffiths for. Morally, this signals the triumph of the 'philosophy' the novel is concerned to propagate. This victory is announced through the words of the broken Griffiths:

'Our creeds have worked themselves out now with a vengeance  
haven't they, Joslin?' he taunted, 'Just like my fate that -  
so near the end - I should see what faith can do - in the family  
that confirmed my scepticism - Stribley's daughter.'

The reading of this novel as ideological conflict is supported by Griffiths' acceptance of defeat: '"you've won, Joslin"' he admits.

Griffiths discovers the truth too late to change - and finds himself abandoned by Minnie Lagor, who tells one of the minor characters: '"You know I've finished with him. He wouldn't be a safe husband without religion"', a decision she reached through Garth's example. Minnie Lagor's response to Garth's 'experiment with prayer' (2) is reflected in several other characters too, if to lesser degrees.

1, *Confession*, p.9. 2, The 'experiment in prayer' was the belief that God must have intended his romance with an under-age girl, and that the following humiliation and five years of separation, were intended by

Despite their evident differences the two central characters have much in common, amongst which is a dislike of 'modern women', an antipathy we have already noted existed in Clemo's unpublished novels. Consonant with this is a preference for women who accept the limitations of domesticity. So that we find Griffith's explaining his interest in Minnie Lagor to Garth Joslin in the following terms:

'I resolved last year that if ever I married again it wouldn't  
be to one of these competent modern women. My wife was that sort  
...It's natural I should look towards someone who can give me  
a taste of the simple domestic virtues...'

Clemon's choice of Griffiths as antagonist marks an advance upon the unpublished novels, where, because of the lack of clear ideological opposition to the central character, the philosophical ideas the novels were concerned to propound had appeared unbalanced.

Clemon's use of landscape has more purpose here, too: again, in part, due to the use of Truro as a symbolic counter to the raw, crude world of the clay quarry villages. In this bleak landscape the novel's various characters find it impossible to deceive themselves, which in Truro it is all too easy to do. It is this symbolic polarity which gives to Truro cathedral its significance. For the cathedral stands as an oasis of veracity, of certainty, amidst the teeming hubbub and narrow-streeted anonymity of the town which surrounds it. It is fitting that hero and heroine should be reunited there, at its altar, as if in confirmation of both the faith that had sustained them and the marriage that is to come.

The novel suffers, however, as had his earlier attempts, from a certain heavy-handedness, noticeable exactly where lightness and sureness of touch are most required. Minnie Lagor's reason for rejecting Griffiths has a certain awkwardness. The argument between Joslin and his ex-fiance, now married, unintentionally presents the hero as unkind and pompous. While Edith Spragg's retort, comic and cutting, finds support from the

God as a testing or time of ripening of that relationship,



reader of a kind Clemo could not have intended. Edith attempts to woo Garth back to her, and thus escape her unhappy circumstances, only to hear Garth cry: '"God just used you as a stop-gap till Irma was ready"'. Her response to this, '"Very obliging of Him, wasn't it?"' inadvertently supports the sorts of queries many readers are likely to have with respect to the novel's theology.

*Wilding Graft* was well received, despite its faults.(1) A.L.Rowse, was quoted in a publicity item in the *United States Publishers' Weekly*, as saying that the novel had haunted him for days. *The Observer* called Clemo 'a richly promising writer who should eventually distinguish himself'.(2) Ironically, it was to be nearly forty years before Clemo succeeded in publishing a second novel.

That novel, *The Shadowed Bed*, has a curious history and a genesis quite unlike that of Clemo's other novels. It was written at tremendous speed, even by Clemo's standards, during the summer of 1938 and in the wake of the removal of the Rowses and their little daughter Barbara from Goonamarris. The twelve months prior had been the time of Clemo's deep study of T. F. Powys, in which he had read several of the novels, the stories and *Soliloquies of a Hermit*. The summer weeks themselves had seen him re-reading Bunyan, particularly the latter's *Holy War*(3) It is Bunyan that Clemo admits as an influence in the shaping of *The Shadowed Bed*, although all Clemo borrowed from Bunyan was the idea of a town which has become the battle-ground of forces divine and demonic. Powys is not mentioned as an influence upon this work, while the impact Powys had upon Clemo is thoroughly stated in his autobiography.(4) Powys's influence is greater in the style and construction of *The Shadowed Bed* than Bunyan's: an influence even more evident in the surviving typescript where there are

1, American reviewers were on the whole more inclined to point out the faults along with the strengths of this first novel; see for example, Orville Prescott's remarks in 'Books of the Times', *New York Times*, 27 October, 1948. Perhaps the severest British reviewer was P.H.Newby who said that Clemo's characters were 'stock-figures from late Victorian fiction' and that Clemo's literary technique was 'pure Hardy', 'New Novels', *New Statesman*, 10 April, 1948. 2, 'Clay Country', *The Observer*, 14 March, 1948. 3, *Confession*, p.156. 4, *ibid.*, p.138.



still traces of the last Powys-like imitations. The stone monolith which plays so important a role in the symbolic system of the novel is taken directly from Powys's novel *The Left Left*, where it is called, 'Wold Jar's stone'. In his own novel Clemo was not to replace the word 'stone' with the alternative 'rock' until some ten years after it was originally written. (1)

Once written the novel was set aside. Clemo seems to have had little interest in publishing it. (2) Clemo did not set about immediate revisions to this novel, as he usually did. He knew it at the time to be something apart, (3) the expression of the full flowering of his Calvinist faith brought to a creative pitch through prolonged study of Browning, Spurgeon and Bunyan. The novel was an aberration, the expression of a mood which soon passed. (4) And yet, the allegorical form of *The Shadowed Bed* seems better suited to the portrayal of spiritual realities which animate the mundane world than the realist model of the novel he subsequently returned to. The capacity of allegorical fiction to simultaneously reveal such a double reality has been well expressed by Brown in his study of Bunyan. Of Bunyan's stories Brown has said that 'while they move in the region of the spiritual and supernatural, they at the same time tread the common earth, their scenes and circumstances being drawn from the writer's actual surroundings'. (5) This statement might as easily be applied to Clemo's *The Shadowed Bed*. There is some cause for believing that Clemo is not temperamentally suited to a realist mode of representation, (6) but if this is the case, one can only wonder why he stayed with it so consistently, unless, of course, this adherence to realism was tied in with his use of the novel form as personal prophecy. Allegory necessarily transcends the

1. These alterations are evident in the 1950 typescript. 2. The reason may have more to do with Clemo's domestic circumstances than the novel. In conversation, Mrs Ruth Clemo explained that Clemo had for this novel used imaginary villages and locations, itself a departure from practice, out of fear of his landlord's response should the clay company feel itself to be being lampooned in the clayworks of the character Beale; the Clemo's lived in a tythe cottage. 3. *Confession*, p.154.

4. *ibid.*, p.167. 5. J. Brown, *John Bunyan; His Life, Times and Work*, London, 1888, p.284.

6. *Gospel*, p.51.



individual.

The novel has two story lines which unfold simultaneously. There is the story of the romance of Joe Gool and Bronwen Cuddy. This romance takes place within the greater drama of the battle between God and the devil in the forms of Potter and Beale. As the novel moves towards its climax the reader realises that Beale's downfall is due to the influence of sexual love transforming the villagers of Carn Veor, but not before the men and women of Carn Veor have themselves been fundamentally affected by undertaking the previously fearful prospect of a walk through Potter's lane.

One of the interesting features of *The Shadowed Bed* is its combination of allegory and satire, allowing an element of humour usually absent from Clemo's work. So, for example, Beale - who symbolizes the devil - is the model of a modern, progressive employer, a man who is concerned with the welfare of his staff and who believes it ~~his~~ duty to contribute to the cultural life of the community. This is an amusing reversal of the reader's expectations, and one which fits well with Clemo's opposition to social welfare creeds which Clemo feared would, like socialism, seduce people away from God. (1) While Potter, who stands in the allegory for God, is a man so much to be feared that he has even been suspected of murdering couples courting on his property. (2) When Timothy, one of the minor characters, hears from Bronwen that Joe is to apply to Potter, Timothy warns her that Potter offers '"Work like a slave's and wages to starve on"'. .

Joe meets Potter's servant and is refused employment; '"Told me Potter's particular who he gives jobs to"'. Later he is offered better prospects by Beale, who normally employs only skilled labour, and is angered by Bronwen's insistence that he must not accept the offer. Joe does not know that Beale has nursed a desire to seduce Bronwen for at least the last year. But it is not until Bert Truscott and several other villagers, following Mrs Yelland's advice, visit Potter's lane that Bronwen

1. See, for example *Gospel*, p.87. 2. In *Confession* Clemo wrote; 'Truth was ...to me a terror that could get its claws into a man's life and hold on until the blood flowed from the wounded and believing heart', p.226.

is forced to recognise that the key to making sense of the enigma of Potter and thus ensuring Joe's employ is to visit Potter's lane with Joe. This is the lane she had inadvertently stumbled into the year before on fleeing Beale's advances when he sought to crown her as Carn Veor carnival queen. That time she had been revolted by the sight of dead horse eaten by rats. This time, with Joe, she encounters the monolith:

The Rock towered starkly above the trees - a broad, shapeless mass of white stone. Its base was embedded in the field, in soft soil, so that it leaned forward slightly... Obviously it had been blasted. Its jagged edges were the result of swift, violent splintering; no tool had been used upon it. But the purpose of this blasting was obscure... And now the Rock was utterly alien and removed. The impact was that of sheer miracle. Though it mediated knowledge it stood by itself in an entirely unknown dimension, so foreign was its atmosphere. There was nothing in Joe or Bronwen, either in their carnal or spiritual perception, that could have faintly understood what it was or what it meant. But as they crept into the shade of the Rock, a germ of apprehension began to form in them...

And so it is that the lovers encounter the ineffable grace of God.

If *The Shadowed Bed* moves, via the 'Rock', towards mysticism at its close, this tendency is counterbalanced by humorous characterisation and a sharp satirical line in Clemo's treatment of Mr Reed, the newly appointed vicar of Carn Veor. A man whose theology rigorously avoids the supernatural, he is ill-equipped to cope with Carn Veor where the supernatural is concentrated in the cosmic battle between Potter and Beale. He represents within the novel all that is misguided and, as his support for the cultured Beale shows, dangerous about Liberal Theology. Clemo describes Mr Reed as follows:

Mr Reed was a timid man, and his religious outlook reflected



his timidity. He had renounced orthodoxy because he lacked the spiritual stamina to bear the incessant stress of its turbulent vitality. He disbelieved in miracles because he was too weary to grapple with such a complex universe as a belief in miracles would imply...He only wished to be left in peace on the purely human level where he could perfect his philosophy of the good life and help people to be nicer to each other,

This description reveals the greater precision of characterisation Clemo was able to achieve when writing in an allegorical-satirical mode. It also shows the lessons he had learnt in his study of T.F.Powys. For while it differs in many ways from the following description taken from Powys's *Mr Tasker's Gods*, principally due to slightly different ideological intentions, it bears the stamp of the original.

The vicar of Shelton, the Rev. Mr. Turnbull, was a sensible man and he understood a great many very important matters. He was well clad in the righteous armour of a thick and scaly conscience, which told him that everything he did was right.(1)

Similarly Clemo's Beale would appear to owe a debt to the character Mr Tasker. Spotting Mr Reed for the first time Beale smiles: 'The ugly smile...on his face was that of a man who had selected a victim'. There is in this description the same pleasure in possession and ruthless destruction that we find in Powys's Mr Tasker who killed his 'gods' or pigs himself:

with great unction he would have crucified them, if he could have bled them better that way, and so have obtained a larger price,

It is Bert Truscott, who fleeing the advances of Beale's daughter, starts off the shift in allegiance to Potter. Discovering the rock for

1. T.F.Powys, *Mr Tasker's Gods*, Beckenham, 1977.

himself he is not content to keep the experience private. Rather, he proclaims it in the village square. This scene (pages 148 -150) is reminiscent of the one Masfield included in his dialect narrative poem *The Everlasting Mercy*, (1) where a character similar to Truscott suffers revelation and abandons drinking and fighting. The similarity may not be accidental, as Clemo had read and been much impressed with *The Everlasting Mercy* in his teens. (2) Bert's conversion is in the eyes of Carn Veor more credible than Mrs Yelland's because more surprising. One by one the villagers find their way to Potter's lane and the battle for the soul of Carn Veor, which had seemed to be going all Beale's way, begins to swing against him. Beale, his influence waning, retires to Helburn clay-pit - the mysterious, hidden works where only the patients of the local lunatic asylum are employed. His departure is mourned by none save Mr Reed, who had interpreted Truscott's encounter with the alien rock as a regression into a kind of primitive faith that his rational religion can only be repulsed by.

Joe, transformed by his visit, receives an offer of employment from Potter's servant and learns that Potter is in fact a very caring employer. With Beale no longer a force for evil all the villagers discover that many of the things they had hitherto believed about Potter are false, and a new brighter future opens up for Carn Veor. While *The Shadowed Bed* shows its indebtedness to Powys, it has more in common with Bunyan in its bouyant optimism - a quality of the book no where else more evident than in its final chapter.

While *The Shadowed Bed* was a departure in style and genre for Clemo, it rehearses the same range of preoccupations as *Wilding Graft* and the numerous unpublished novels: a liking for an uncultured village existence rather than the culture and comfort of the towns, the insistence that Christian grace can only be grasped in the embrace of lovers, a contempt for philosophies of social amelioration and social engineering: and a reluctance to use the beauties of nature as correlatives of God's beneficence. It is significant, for example, that Joe discovers after Beale's defeat that Potter's farm employs only those who have not

1, John Masfield, *The Everlasting Mercy*, London, 1911. 2, Letter to author,



seen the rock. Mrs Prynne explains to him: "'All who see the Rock do get work afterwards in Pentroth Pit"'. The fields are as much a source of delusion here as in any of the poems Clemo was to write after the war. For, as Mrs Prynne makes plain, "'there's no more dreaming in the fields for they"' whom Potter has appointed. They have the truth. The clay stands in this novel as a double symbol. As the human material that forces divine and demonic shape as they will, and as a symbol of God's grace itself. The clay in Potter's Pentroth pit is, we are told, the best there is.

In 1976 Clemo published a short story in *Cornish Short Stories*, edited by Denys Val Baker. The story, 'The Clay Dump', is a study in obsession and communicates successfully an unwavering intensity of mood appropriate to its subject. The story was taken almost line for line from the pages of an unpublished novel, *The Dry Kiln*, which seems to have been written around 1950-51. It would appear that Clemo, approached by Baker, instinctively resorted to his old fiction habit of cannibalization. It is perhaps surprising that, following the acceptance of this story, Clemo did not pursue this genre further. With several thousands of pages of unpublished material unused for thirty years, many stories might have been extracted from them. Blindness had not prevented Clemo re-animating a character from *The Dry Kiln* nearly word perfect, and it is reasonable to assume, therefore, he was capable of doing so again.<sup>(2)</sup> That he did not is perhaps an indication that by 1976 Clemo was satisfied that poetry allowed him to express all he wished ~~to~~. That he had, by the time this story was published, been writing portraits and dramatic monologues for several years, may also have been a factor. For these poetic genres allowed him the same opportunities for the study of character, but through biography, that the short story and novel would have, through fiction.

1. Denys Val Baker, *Cornish Short Stories*, Harmondsworth, 1976.

2. Clemo's apparent ability to recall his own material even after decades have elapsed will be returned to in Chapter Fourteen.

CHAPTER SIX  
A NEUTRAL GROUND

*The Clay Verge* dramatizes Clemo's rejection of all forms of natural theology, and he does so in the name of faith. (1) As John Press put it in an early study, it presents a conflict between 'Grace and Nature'. (2) While nature is a given, grace is an act of God which man cannot anticipate or command. What Clemo attempts in these poems is a cleansing of the stain of the natural world, in line with *Luke 18:22-25*, as a demonstration of his faithfulness. This is the meaning of 'Neutral Ground'.

God's image was washed out of Nature  
By the flood of the Fall;  
No symbol remains to inspire me,  
And none to appal,

His hand did not fashion the vistas  
These poets admire,  
For He is too busied in glutting  
The worm and the fire,

Not in Nature or God must my vision  
Now find some relief  
While I deepen my hatred of beauty,  
Suspend my belief,

1, *John*, 6:65. 2, John Press, *Rule and Energy*, Oxford, 1963, p.128.



I will turn to a world that is ravaged,  
Yet not by His Will,  
A world whose derision of Nature  
Is rigid and shrill,

I have lost all the sensitive, tender,  
Deep insights of man;  
I will look round a claywork in winter,  
And note what I can,

This poem establishes the parameters of the vision *The Clay Verge* will enunciate. Three things deserve initial general comment: a) the rejection of nature ('God's image was washed out of Nature'); b) the rejection, or apparent rejection, of God (Not in Nature or God' and 'Suspend my belief'); c) the rejection of all that is good and to be valued in mankind ('I have lost all the sensitive, tender,/ Deep insights of man'). The poem can be read as the proposal for establishing a new phenomenology of grace. All that stands outside the domain of grace - knowledge of God, the natural world, human perception, intelligence, feelings - are put into parenthesis and set aside. Taking literally Calvin's elevation of grace as the only determinant for salvation, Clemo utilizes the industrial claywork as a locus for an activity that must slough off the accumulated wisdom of the ages. For this wisdom is but a burden, a sentence unto death. As Barth put it in one of his prison sermons: 'We spend our life in the midst of a whole world of sin and captivity and suffering'. (1) Nothing that is not directly given to us by God can be of any use for salvation, and must be set aside; and this is precisely what Clemo does in 'Neutral Ground'. From the perspective of grace even the Christian religion is 'clearly seen to be a human attempt to anticipate what God in His revelation wills to do and does do. It is the attempted replacement of the divine work by human manufacture'. (2)

1. Karl Barth, *Deliverance of the Captives*, London, 1961, p.37.

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, *op.cit.*, p.307.

The harshness of Clemo's religious vision aligns him with the Welsh poet R.S.Thomas. But Thomas has not pushed his search for God to the edge of a kind of autism (and beyond) as Clemo does here. It is this that renders *The Clay Verge* 'unique', a term Hoaxie Fairchild applied to Clemo in her study of contemporary religious poets.(1)

A cultural phenomenon, religious poetry is necessarily dependent upon the cultural codes of its day (hence the religious use of erotic language to express adoration, for example), and this is as true for our century as it was for previous ones. Only a few theologians over the past hundred years have attempted anything as radical as Clemo proposes in 'Neutral Ground' - one thinks of Overbeck, Barth, Kierkegaard. And like these innovators Clemo had to be prepared to suffer the consequences, which meant for him as it had for Kierkegaard, terrible isolation. He was aware of the cost and prepared to face it as an unpublished 1950 poem showed:

Better be crazed with isolating fear  
Than sane in brotherhood's pale unity;  
Stronger than teamwork is the lonely tear -  
Greater than fellowship is agony,(2)

At the time of its composition this poem expressed a mood that had largely left him, Clemo having passed beyond his time of intensest individualism by then, but it indicates a mood he had been familiar with, and expresses a willingness to endure it. In terms of his poetry it meant submitting himself to, and constructing out of, the clayscape an anagogical schema in which Christian truth, as Clemo understood it, could validly be expressed.

Central to his thought, as it must be for every Calvinist, is the Fall. While Clemo nowhere attempts a dramatisation of it, its implications are everywhere evident in his early mature poems. The Fall lies like a shadow across the world and brings with it the spiritual vacuum 'Neutral Ground' portrays. This is patently clear in the poem's opening stanza. But beyond a personal sense of spiritual vacuity 'Neutral Ground' proposes

1, Hoaxie Neal Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry; Valley of Dry Bones*, Cambridge, 1968, p.450.

2, Extract published in *Gospel*, p.65.



this emptiness as an objective fact: it is the condition of the phenomenal world. Nature, conceived in general terms or in its particularities ('no image') is a sign without divine significance. Recognition of which leaves the poet emptied of all that is human: religion, aesthetics, science, as all these draw their meanings from the natural world:

I have lost all the sensitive, tender,  
Deep insights of man, . . .

Emotion, in the form of hate, is reserved for nature. With faith suspended, the poet becomes a camera, observing, recording, indifferently:

I will look round a claywork in winter,  
And note what I can,

The poem's closing lines are important in establishing the validity of the vision which Clemo creates out of the clayworks. Meaning, the anagogical, is left to materialize independently of the poet's will. What H.J. Blackham said of Heidegger's phenomenology of Being, may fairly be applied to Clemo's phenomenology of grace: 'we are up against an irreducible existence which we must...describe but cannot constitute'.<sup>(1)</sup> Such a world is the clayworks for Clemo.

If the world of the clayscape is a world of pure facticity, one wonders how the poet is to transcend the suspension of belief he has imposed upon himself. If one cannot, with Hopkins, cry, 'Over again I feel Thy finger and find Thee' ('The Wreck of the Deutschland') one faces a situation in which God's existence and non-existence amount to the same thing. Clemo avoids this because the neutrality of the clayworks contrasts with the vigorous activity beyond its borders. The natural world still exists;; still offers itself as a source of delusion.

His hand did not fashion the vistas  
These poets admire, . . .

1. H.J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers*, London, 1961, p.88

What Clemo asserts here seems to imply that the natural world is the product of demonic creation, and this precipitates a terrible conceptual reversal. Not only does the poet claim that the natural world with all its beauty has nothing to do with God, he then appropriates demonic characteristics with which to describe that God:

...He is too busied in glutting  
The worm and the fire,

The God Clemo speaks of here is the God of the apocalypse, the Destroyer God. The gerund 'glutting' seems to convey a sense of delight or enthusiasm on God's part, deliberately force-feeding all he can into the maws of Corruption and Annihilation.

Clemon's thorough-going rejection of the physical world, his reification of the supernatural, suggests an inclination towards Gnosticism. This would be a false reading. Clemon rejects the natural world as a false language, and asserts the facticity of the clayworks in its place. It is the radical nature of Clemon's orthodoxy - a position not, to my knowledge, used to poetic ends before - which makes such confusion possible. Created in God's image the evidence of its divine origins were 'washed out' by the Fall. To employ Barth's terminology, the world is 'rejected' of God. I need make no apology at this stage for re-using material from Barth's *Church Dogmatics* already employed in the reading of Clemon's novels, for a correct understanding of the dynamics of 'rejection' is central not only to this poem but to all the poems of *The Clay Verge*. Barth makes it clear that the concept of election applies not just to human individuals but to the whole of creation(1) and that while election is offered to all (this is God's divine 'Yes' to the world(2)) the category of the rejected actively oppose God's grace: 'They even refuse this offer with hostility.'(3) Hostile rejection of God is the defining characteristic of fallen creation, its opposition 'constitutes the very being of the world as such.'(4)

1. Barth, *ibid.*, p.27. 2. *ibid.*, p.31. 3. *ibid.*, p.346. 4. *ibid.*, p.26



It is not the case then that the world was created by evil but rather that, having had God's presence erased from it - washed out of it - to attribute beauty, truth, etc., to the world is to misread the world. The material world offers evidence only of its post-lapsarian condition: its beauty is the beauty of sin and to read positive values into such a world is to be immersed in a terrible and damning folly. It was just this error Clemo believed poets and artists were most prone to and which precipitated the tragic lives they were inclined to lead. Truth and beauty, in Clemo's vision, are antonyms. When the first man disobeyed God's command Nature was instrumental in his fall from grace and participated in that fall. Accomplice then, Nature continues throughout the ages to play a part in every human's perpetual rejection of God, setting itself up in his place as a source of spiritual inspiration and replenishment. The tenets of natural theology being appropriate only to the pre-lapsarian world, the temptation to read the divine through (fallen) nature only ensures mankind, even when most sincere in its desire to know and worship God, will worship what is opposed to God, a point firmly made in his spiritual biography.<sup>(1)</sup> It is this reading of the Fall which determines Clemo's rejection of nature (and man, a creature of nature).

But for Clemo the fallenness of the world is not simply a historical fact, it is a daily, lived reality. Nor is nature to be understood as the passive victim of its condition. The poet is daily reminded of, and repulsed by, nature's role in the divine betrayal. Of blackberries he writes:

Each thorn among those blackberries  
Has pierced the Hand that made it...

('The Child Traitor')

While in 'The Irony of Election' the Garden of Gethsemane is seen to rehearse Judas Iscariot's moment of treachery:

1. *Gospel*, p. 87.

In that Garden we so sadly name  
The trees betrayed Him before Judas came...

Recollection of this moment reminds the poet of the speciousness of all natural beauty: 'The Irony of Election' immediately continues:

And every tree's a Judas still;  
Each little flower is glib to fill  
The cup of which He prayed;  
'Father, may this cup pass'.

The theology that provides the foundation for Clemo's poetry in *The Clay Verge* and beyond is not then one aspect of the poems to be considered alongside others. It is the heart and substance of them. This is why I believe Thurley's interpretation of Clemo's post-war poems simplifies the real situation. For while my description of the phenomenology of 'Neutral Ground' appears to sit very comfortably alongside Thurley's evocation of a 'denuded reality, of life when little but existence itself remains', (1) the apparent similarity is deceptive. Clemo does not understand the world as 'denuded reality'. Quite the contrary, he reads the natural world, as I have shown, as alive with opposition to God, and seeks refuge from the seduction of that world in a landscape not susceptible to the interpretative strategies of natural theology and the aesthetics derived from them. As he has said in *The Invading Gospel*, 'No faculty of mind or emotion can apprehend truth except on the basis of forgiveness for its natural alienation from truth'. (2) And since it is through these very faculties that we constitute our existence in a (fallen) world they must be rejected in order that truth can be perceived. The attributes of adulthood - intellect, reason, reasonableness, are identified in 'The Excavator' as part of the 'Progressive sickness of the mind'. But simply to sweep these away and rely upon subjectivism, intuition, the irrational, would be to

1. Geoffrey Thurley, *The Irony Harvest*, London, 1974, p.167. 2. *Gospel*, p.18.



fall into a complementary error. The very error he believed creative personalities were most prone to, and which led to the production of 'especially perverted insight[s]' (1) rather than privileged ones. Art, no less than science is 'allied to natural religion'. (2) What was necessary was not the abandonment of human reason alone, but the abandonment of the entire cultural edifice: classical-rationalist and romantic-intuitionist alike. Along with this went a rejection of poetry, a word which in *The Clay Verge* is used only with contempt.

Clemons, of course, is not alone in the history of literature in believing poetry incompatible with religious humility. Gerard Manley Hopkins renounced poetry as an act of obedience without feeling the need to renounce nature, which he believed 'charged with the grandeur of God' ('God's Grandeur'). (3) But Clemons's theology required him to reject both nature and poetry; and at a time of tremendous 'poetic' inspiration. This accounts for the anti-aesthetic of *The Clay Verge*. As he expresses this idea in 'The Excavator', he must avoid those things designed to:

Tempt simple souls like me  
Whom nature meant to seal  
With doom of poetry,  
And dowered with eye and brain  
Sensitive to the stain  
Of Beauty and the grace of man's Ideal,

While the terms 'nature' and 'poetry' are not synonymous here the poem establishes a close relationship. In 'The Clay-tip Worker' their inter-relationship is brought closer to synonymity. In this poem the poet exploits the persona of a labourer whose task it is to tip the waste contents of the overhead pulley trucks onto the top of a waste dump. In

1. *Gospel*, pp.14-15. 2. *Gospel*, p.15. 3. G.S.Wakefield has suggested that 'The Catholic may have more in common with the good pagan than has the Puritan, and may on the whole find it easier to approach God through nature, while the Puritan approaches nature through God'; see, *Puritan Devotion: its place in the development of Christian Piety*, London, 1957, p.162.

the process the waste cascades down the sides of the conical tip and over the flowers and grasses that have seeded at its base during the spring months. It is the destruction of this natural growth that delights the labourer:

...I advance to pour  
Sand, mud and rock upon the store  
Of springtime loveliness idolaters adore,

These actions are understood to be consonant with divine 'redemptive vision':

And it is joy to me  
To lengthen thus a finger of God  
That wars with poetry,

In this poem nature's glories are expressive of her fallen vanity, her 'flaunting pride and power'. So closely is the persona identified with the work of God he feels himself a priest 'Crusading from the tip-beams'.

In this poem, the spoiling of nature is transformed from an industrial consequence into the work of God. This curious approval of ecological vandalism is the direct consequence of Clemo's understanding of grace as revelation. For, from this perspective, the beauty of nature is a 'poetry' which stands in direct opposition to God. An identical double rejection (of nature and poetry) occurs in 'The Excavator', where the poet confesses his difference from other poets:

I cannot share their language; I am one  
Who feels the doggerel of Heaven  
Purge earth of poetry...

In the 'stripped clay desert', the neutral ground of the clayworks, it



becomes possible to eschew all habituated perceptions and interpretations. Naked in this way one's faculties will hear God unadulterated.

But if the language of poetry must be rejected along with the objects of poetry what new form will this 'redemptive' poetry take? Clemo had consciously renounced poetry at one time because, 'it had meant for me the worship of strange gods, the cultivation of ideals that could never be reconciled to the curt brutality of the Gospel'.<sup>(1)</sup> Clemo's solution produces a poetry which is noticeably post-symbolist, as Thurley observed.<sup>(2)</sup> But while Clemo's imagery displays a post-symbolist paradigm the intent behind it, if this reading of Clemo is sound, ought to be very different from the purposes to which modern poets have put such imagery. And this appears to be the case. Stephen Spender has said that 'modern poets like Eliot, and, of a later generation, Auden...were fascinated by phenomena which were specifically modern, and they regarded the city and the industrial scene as a world to be conquered by poetry',<sup>(3)</sup> while, according to Michael Hamburger, the aim of post-symbolism has been 'to bring poetry into line with the experience of life in late-capitalist industrialized environments'.<sup>(4)</sup> Neither of these accounts approximates to Clemo's concern to find a means within poetry of accurately communicating the full significance of orthodox Protestantism.<sup>(5)</sup> Clemo's rejection of an outmoded poetics was not in order to render poetry contemporary, but to purify himself of the bewitchment of poetry:

All poets are aware of the antagonism between Nature and dogma,  
but no poet, except by the grace of God, ever takes the side of  
dogma against Nature. His deepest instinct is to ally himself  
with Nature, to dispute the claims of doctrinal revelation...Yet  
it is only when a poet makes some concession, when he sacrifices

1. *Confession*, p.222. 2. Thurley, p.169. 3. *The Struggle of the Modern*, London, 1963, p.151. 4. *The Truth of Poetry*, London, 1969, p.225. 5. David Gascoyne's poetry, particularly 'The Gravel-pit Field' would appear to be an exception to this and shares something of Clemo's intention, without adopting the latter's Barthian theology; *Collected Poems*, Oxford, 1970.

some of the 'pure' poetry within himself...that he becomes really original. I had undergone this process to the extent of a complete reversal of sympathies which led me to write poems deriding the conventional poetic insights and usages,(1)

. It was this rejection of nature, on theological grounds, which resulted in Clemo's valorization of its despoliation. Not in an effort to spiritualize the dominant environment of Western twentieth century man, but in order to purge himself of the stain of his own humanity; to become, through the articulation of such a vision, the human equivalent of the 'stripped clay desert.'

From this understanding of Clemo's attitude towards nature we can approach his relationship to another important influence upon twentieth century poetry, Thomas Hardy. While there is no mention in Clemo's autobiographical volumes of Hardy as a poetic influence, indeed the evidence there seems to reject this possibility, there is about the poems discussed so far much that reminds the reader of Hardy's poems concerned with a philosophical explanation of nature and man. Clemo's severe attitude towards nature finds precedent, for example, in Hardy's 'The Mother Mourns'. The two poets seem to share a sense that nature, rather than being a fit object of praise, is a phenomenon which, so malign is it, requires at the least a radical overhaul, and at best, obliteration. Hardy, in 'The Sleepwalker' had written:

Wilt thou destroy, in one wild shock of shame,  
Thy whole high heaving firmamental frame,  
Or patiently adjust, amend, and heal?(2)

Yet again, Clemo's argument in 'Neutral Ground' that the earth has been abandoned by God was the subject of Hardy's poem 'God-Forgotten'. Such apparent similarities may suggest that the title 'Neutral Ground' itself owes a debt to Hardy's poem 'Neutral Tones'. But these similarities are not, as will be evident from what has been said so far of Clemo's work,

1, *Confession*, p.222. 2, Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems*, London, 1976.



expressive of a shared 'philosophy'. And Hardy's verse was so rooted in traditional forms that comparison offers no evidence of influence. Besides which, the poems where Hardy and Clemo appear, superficially, close, constitute too small a section of either poets' work.

Some of the poems in *The Clay Verge* attempt to articulate a recognition of the beauty of the clayworks without the theological imperative dominant in the poetry discussed so far. They assert, that is, that the detritus of industrialism has its own charm. Thus in 'Quarry Snow', Clemo writes:

There is no beauty in snow on trees  
Compared to the beauty of flakes on these  
Angular pit-growths hewn by blast,...

But Clemo is less confident when pursuing this line and the poetry he writes can too easily degenerate into a doggerel of the kind he did have in mind when he opposed 'the doggerel of Heaven' to the poetry of earth in 'The Excavator'. 'Snowfall at Kernick' suffers accordingly:

Here with a burly flutter and sting  
The snow-blast scampers winnowing,  
And dribble of foam-flakes seeps and bores  
Through clay-clump thickets, under doors,

'The Water-wheel', another poem in the same mould, finds the necessary strength Clemo's verse needs in the perpetual wrestle that takes place on the borders of the clay and natural worlds:

The iron rods are gripped;  
Tree-high the pulleys slur;  
The budding boughs are bruised and stripped;  
Dead iron, live branches blur  
In rhythmic massacre,

It is interesting that these three poems were written after 'Christ in the Clay-pit' and 'The Excavator'. (1) They are not the work of a poet moving towards a new vision, but rather record his adaptation to that vision.

That the poetic expression of the vision first expressed in *The Shadowed bed* and *Wilding Graft* took Clemo by surprise is made clear both in his first volume of autobiography and in the poems written at the time. 'Why should I find Him here' Clemo asks in the opening line of 'Christ in the Clay-pit':

And not in a church, nor yet  
Where nature heaves a breast like Olivet  
Against the stars?

The rest of the poem provides the answer. For while:

...fields and woods lie dreaming yet of peace  
'Twixt God and His creation, of release  
From potent wrath

a hope the poem claims is shared by 'churches nestling snugly in the fold/  
Of scented hillsides', only the clay-pit speaks of the spiritual revolution which must precede such a new harmony. For the world, like the clay-pit must:

... 'be disembowelled of Nature's stain  
And rendered fit  
By violent mouldings through the tunnelled ways  
Of all He would regain,

Clemon found God in the clayworks, then, because this scenery presaged, as nature could not, the invasion, turbulence and remoulding the soul must experience before it is remade in God's image. (2)

1. *Confession*, p.222. 2. *Gospel*, pp.6-7.



Here the 'neutral ground' of the clayworks loses its neutrality. Geography becomes Christography. 'I peer', the poet says:

Upon His footsteps in this quarried mud;  
I see His blood  
In rusty stains on pit-props, waggon frames  
Bristling with nails, not leaves, There were no leaves  
Upon His chosen Tree...

'The Excavator' similarly employs the clayworks for a 'composition of place'. For it is in the twisted, ugly forms of the clayworks that the poet finds the promise of redemption, not in the soothing beauties of the fields beyond. For redemption is only made possible through Christ's having appropriated to himself the role which properly belongs to the world - the role of the rejected.(1) In the clayworks this theological reality cannot be hidden from:

The bars now hinged o'erhead and drooping form  
A Cross that lacks the symmetry  
Of those in churches, but is more  
Like His Whose stooping tore  
The vitals from our world's foul secrecy.

This vision places Clemo with contemporary post-Barthian theologians like Jurgen Moltmann, who, in his *The Crucified God* says, 'The Cross is and always must be an affront, an offence in a world that we would make over to our own uses'.(2) And, Clemo, defiantly asserts, 'this is Christian art'. He goes further when he compares God to the claywork excavator, 'That broken-mouthed gargoyle', and seems to teeter on the brink of blasphemy to such an extreme is his vision at this point pushed. But again we find that some sixteen years after Clemo wrote this poem, the same view was to find expression in the field of philosophical theology. For Moltmann is at

1, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, *op.cit.*, p.346. 2, *The Crucified God*, London, 1974, p.35.

pains to make clear the Christian must 'abandon every kind of self-deification or likeness to God, in order to recognise the God who reveals himself in the crucified Christ'. (1) Clemo had arrived at this conclusion by his own route, many years before he read Barth. (2) It finds prose expression again in *The Invading Gospel*: When Christ said, "Love thy neighbour as thyself," the cosmos did not seem to be shocked or even interested. When He said, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" the shock of His words produced an earthquake and a solar blackout...' (3)

The question which has been begged so far in this outline of Clemo's conception of God is from where it was derived. We have seen in Chapter One that Clemo maintains that it was his experience of God as violent and tyrannical which led him to a temporary sympathy with Fascism. But violence is not something usually associated with God, nor an attribute made much of in devotional and theological works: certainly not those available to Clemo during the years in which he developed his view of God. Neither do Clemo's autobiographical volumes provide evidence of a childhood disturbed by violence: blindness and deafness are personal tragedies, but they are not violent. The conflict Clemo suffered, from his teens on, at the psychological level, following his mother's 'revelations' concerning Jack's father and his father's family may, however, provide us with the source of his attribution of violence to God. Clemo has himself, as we have seen, drawn parallels between his family experience and that of D.H. Lawrence, and Lawrence's own case may provide us with the key to unlock Clemo's.

In his study of Lawrence, Pritchard lays great stress upon the importance of his parents' mis-mating. Pritchard talks not only of Lawrence's inability to grow out of an Oedipal love for his mother until after her death, but of its inhibiting effect upon Lawrence both sexually and artistically. (4) More relevant here are his statements concerning Lawrence's conception of male sexuality. Pritchard speaks of Lawrence's fear of 'his father's passionate nature', which caused him to confuse 'violence with sexuality'. Pritchard argues that it was 'partly because

1, Moltmann, pp.27-28. 2, See present paper, p.37. 3, *Gospel*, p.57

4, R.E.Pritchard, *D.H.Lawrence; Body of Darkness*, London, 1971, p.13.



of this confusion of violence with sexuality, partly because of his fear of expressing his sexuality with his mother, [that] he saw masculine, phallic energy as loveless, cruel, savage'. For Lawrence, Pritchard says, 'To obtain such power was...to revert to a pre-civilized condition'. (1)

Lawrence generated an overly reverential attitude towards female sexuality, based upon his perception of his mother, which made communion between the male and female principles problematic if not impossible. This conception of womanhood, Pritchard explains, 'seemed to dominate and dispossess his masculinity: the resentful reaction produced...a jeering grotesqueness, a perverse sexual self-assertion associated with images of...a gargoyle human-devil face'. (2)

What Pritchard has said of Lawrence seems surprisingly appropriate to Clemo. He even uses an image Clemo employs to describe God, the gargoyle, to represent Lawrence's distorted assertion of his own masculinity. Clemo's struggle with God, one is tempted to suggest, is also a struggle to come to terms with the male principle as it applied to himself as a Clemo as he had come to understand his father through his mother's version of that man's behaviour. The theological interpretation of God Clemo constructed was, in part at least, then, an attempt to come to terms with his own sexuality. God the father was inextricably confused with his notions of his own father. To speak so is not to deny the theological validity of Clemo's vision of God, it is only an attempt to explain its derivation. Such an interpretation does allow us to account for subsequent developments in that vision, however, and this will be something later chapters will be much concerned with.

Clemon does not reject the natural world in 'The Excavator', 'Christ in the Clay-pit' and other poems. While he rejects the false theology constructed upon it, he stands, along with St. Paul (4), in solidarity with

1. Pritchard, p.23. 2. *ibid.*, p.24. 4. *Epistle to the Romans*, 8,19ff.

creation. It is Moltmann, again, who has in theological prose most closely enunciated Clemo's position here.<sup>(1)</sup> If the significance of the Fall invalidates the world as spiritual signifier, if its aesthetic pleasures deaden the senses to the reality of Christ crucified, it is in the clayworks that one rediscovers both Christ crucified and the promise of Christian eschatology. And it is from this perspective that we need to view a poem like Clemo's 'The Clay-tip Worker'.

The delight in destruction communicated in this poem is not the expression of a loathing of nature, although we recall that in 'Neutral Ground' Clemo had spoken of a hatred of beauty. Rather, its joy is in the poem's identification with the natural world which, suffering as it does destruction and burial under the clay-waste, rehearses its eschatological purification and restoration in a new 'body of glory' as Paul expresses it in *Romans*. For the 'refuse' which 'moves against the dower/ The flaunting pride and power/ Of springtide beauty menacing the sod' anticipates the redemption of the world on the Day of Judgment. The refuse has 'redemptive vision'. As the clay worker cries in the poem's final lines:

"Praise God, the earth is maimed,  
And there will be no daisies in that field  
Next spring; it will not yield  
A single bloom or grass blade; I shall see  
In symbol potently  
Christ's Kingdom there restored;  
One patch of Poetry reclaimed  
By Dogma; one more triumph for the Lord,"

1. Moltmann, writes 'If faith awaits the "redemption of the body" and a bodily resurrection from the dead, and the annihilation of death, then it begins to see itself in profound solidarity with "the earnest expectation of the creature"... Thus he... finds himself along with the world in that process to which the way is opened by the eschatological promise of Christ': *Theology of Hope*, London, 1967, p.69



What initially seemed a semiotically neutral territory, has become a field rich with spiritual significance and promise. It is not surprising then that Clemo sought in poems like 'Quarry Snow' or 'The Flooded Clay-pit' to sing its praises. Rather it is remarkable that these poems appear so flat and dull. Only once did Clemo achieve in a poem descriptive of the claylands the precise observation, and the genuineness of voice upon which his poetry depends for its success. That poem was 'Sufficiency':

Yes, I might well grow tired  
Of slighting flowers all day long,  
Of making my song  
Of the mud in the kiln, of the wired  
Poles on the clay-dump; but where  
Should I find my personal pulse of prayer  
If I turned from the broken, scarred  
And unkempt land, the hard  
Contours of dogma, colourless hills?  
Is there a flower that thrills  
Like frayed rope? Is there grass  
That cools like gravel, and are there streams  
Which murmur as clay-silt does that Christ redeems?

The questions asked here were to become pertinent personal questions after his romance with Eileen Funston and his refusal, following that time, to again 'express a savage glee at the destruction of earthly beauty'.<sup>(1)</sup> But one finds in this poem a tender love rather than 'savage glee'. The three questions are part of the rhetorical structure of the poem, they have a persuasive function, but they are not merely rhetorical questions. Clemo undeniably means what he says about frayed rope and gravel. His immersion in the claylands, undertaken for the reasons we have traced, has resulted in a situation in which the poet cannot contemplate the possibility of

1. *Marriage*, p.50.

another landscape, another geography, being expressive of the religious truths he holds dear. The monochromatic hills have become part of a new rhetoric which applauds the plainness of divine truth, which from the human perspective is 'grim and grey' since it is concerned with man's depravity, his hopelessness. The rhetoric gains strength from its simultaneous exploitation of denotative and connotative meaning. As poet of the claylands - and therefore a man who has rejected the poet's love of natural beauty - he hymns 'but clay': but 'clay' biblically considered is also a metaphor of man's materiality, Adam was made by God out of the clay. The poet speaks of man's fundamental human condition. In as much as he *hymns* 'clay' (connotatively) he offers hope, through the re-presentation of God's word, to the rest of mankind. The poem speaks of Clemo's personal confidence in his God, his own sense of reintegration with divine law, and of the reality of a new poetry: a human celebration of God that wills not to be made over in man's image any longer.

'Sufficiency' is similar in many ways to R.S. Thomas's 'No Through Road', (1) and a comparative reading is instructive. Both poems open with an admission of the poet's dependency upon topography as the means by which fidelity to the truth of their vision is assured. (And both poets are first and foremost Christian poets, concerned to communicate Christian truth). But beyond these points it very soon becomes clear that these poems, rather than being similar - in the sense of being concerned with the same or like matters - are, more properly, mirror images of each other. Their moods are likewise reversed.

'No Through Road' opens, like 'Sufficiency', with a statement of doubt on the poet's part with respect to his topographical imperative:

All in vain, I will cease now  
My long absorption with the plough  
With the tame and the wild creatures  
And man united with the earth,

1, *Selected Poems 1946-1968*, London, 1973.



While there are important but subtle distinctions between the significance of the two opening statements, what is more evident still is the difference of landscape to which dependency is owed. Thomas's semiotic landscape is precisely that which Clemo's aesthetic has rejected - the humanly tamed agricultural world and, beyond that, untamed nature ('the wild creatures'). Thomas speaks of his failure to render out of his chosen domain an honest representation of truth:

I have failed after many seasons  
To bring truth to birth...

This, quite clearly is not the mood communicated in Clemo's poem. There it is not failure so much as an anticipation of, at worst, exhaustion on the poet's part.

In the closing lines of stanza one Thomas identifies the cause or source of his failure; the fallacy of natural theology: 'nature's simple equations' he says, 'do not apply'. Both poems, at this point, raise the apparently irresolvable problem for topographical artists like themselves: if this landscape has (or in Clemo's case, may in the future) proved no longer valuable what is the alternative? 'But where to turn?', Thomas asks in a sentence that virtually paraphrases Clemo's own. Both own to the impossibility of such an option. Thomas writes:

...Earth endures  
After the passing, necessary shame  
Of winter, and the old lie  
Of green places beckons me still...

And it is just here that we discover the crucial difference between these poems, and, it may be argued, the superiority of Clemo's chosen domain. Thomas admits that nature offers only an 'old lie' in respect of spiritual truth, a lie from the promulgation of which he cannot free himself. In the final two lines of the poem he casts a glance, as it were, to that other

(industrial) landscape, 'the new world, ugly and evil'. There, he says, others 'pry...in truth's name'. Temperamentally opposed to it he has cut off from an exploration of its significance. The consequence of this is that the poet can only return to a world that still holds him without any longer convincing him of its fidelity to truth.

It is a sobering poem, and its mood of hopelessness contrasts strikingly with Clemo's evident enthusiasm for the fidelity to Christian truth of his landscape. Beyond this, 'Sufficiency' provides the preventative against the sense of futility Thomas so powerfully articulates. For the deficiencies of the clayland, should they ever begin to tire the poet, will be compensated for in a 'human flower'. That Clemo speaks of a promised bride as flower, is, it can be seen, highly significant. It admits, on the one hand, that the 'hard/ Contours' and 'colourless hills' offer only a limited expression of faith: faith's discipline, as it were. The word 'flower' contrasts with this in a gesture towards the gentler, more appealing associations of natural beauty. But such a flower, and Clemo makes this same point in his poem to Søren Kierkegaard, 'Thorn in the Flesh', will be given to him by God, and therefore its fidelity to Christian truth will, unlike that of the natural world, be assured.

Thomas's 'No Through Road' confirms, as it were, the psychological-theological correctness of Clemo's suspicion with regard to a Christian-poetic use of nature. Clemo's self-imposed discipline, by means of which he rid himself of the bewitchment of nature,<sup>(1)</sup> is itself indirectly validated by Thomas's 'No Through Road'.

To build so much upon a comparative reading of just two poems is dangerous. It may also, in this case, be considered justified. For while it is no discredit to Thomas that he has continued to explore the potential of the landscape and people of North Wales - and produced poetry of the highest quality in doing so - it is to Clemo's credit that, perceiving the inadequacy of natural theology as a route to truth, he was prepared to undertake the difficult task of constructing an entirely new aesthetic which would, so far as he was concerned, place truth before all else.

1. Clemo, *Unicorn*, op.cit.



I do not believe that any other English language poet has, in so small a volume of poems, treated of so complex an array of theological issues - original sin, the Fall, an intricately argued debate concerning the efficacy of natural theology, the spirituality or otherwise of our culture's religious products, the nature of worship and Christology, nor rendered them so succinctly, daringly and with such personal conviction. If Clemo, less than ten years after writing these poems, was to describe them as 'the dregs' of an individualism he had since outgrown (1) this should not be seen as a denunciation of the vision articulated in the poetry. Rather, it is the expression of Clemo's willingness constantly to go beyond, to push into new areas in the search for Christian truth.

1. Clemo, *Signatures*, op.cit.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
ROMANCE IN THE CLAY

The poems of *The Clay Verge* discussed so far, with one exception, are exclusively concerned with the poetic restoration of an orthodox Protestant vision. That exception is 'Sufficiency'. Towards the poem's close the poet hears the voice of God issuing him a personal promise. Despite the poet's enclosure in the claylands, God reassures him that he will not tire of praising 'rope', 'gravel' and 'mud' because God will provide him with 'a human flower', and that contact will provide the poet with all else necessary to make him a whole man. And thus 'Sufficiency' combines Clemo's concern to promulgate Christian truth as he saw it with the second, more private version of his faith, the belief that he was predestined by God to marry.

Some half dozen poems from *The Clay Verge* collection deal with this second aspect of the poet's faith. While at the time of their publication poems like 'Christ in the Clay-pit' were, at the least, understood to be an expression of the writer's 'struggling to work out a theology which shall be understandable and reasonably held', (1) the love poems suffered misreading. One reviewer, for example, read 'The Burnt Bush' to be a description of how the poet and his mistress 'have sexual intercourse' (2) on a clay dump beside an ignited gorse bush. The possibility of this kind of misreading is increased because another poem, 'A Calvinist In Love', explicitly writes of 'petting' and 'love' in a similar setting. This kind of misreading has deeply concerned Clemo and he sought to avoid the use of erotic imagery to describe spiritual experience in subsequent work, although not with complete consistency.

The poems were written at a time when Clemo's only feminine contacts were with under age girls, and are either written about them or are

1. *The Inquirer*, 24 November, 1951. 2. *Poetry Quarterly*, December, 1951.



extrapolations into adult sexual relations on the basis of them. Perhaps this encouraged confusion in reviewers who had not previously read *Confession of a Rebel*. But the love poems consistently employ the imagery of the bulk of *The Clay Verge* poems, and deserve to be read within the context in which they were published. Even out of context 'The Burnt Bush' should not have suffered the kind of misreading it did, and requires only a passing familiarity with the Bible in order to be read correctly.

The poem narrates some horse-play between the poet and a girl - age unspecified. In a moment of fun the girl sets light to a gorse bush, described in the poem as:

A single stain of green and gold  
'Mid glacial whiteness fold on fold,

The poem then records the poet's reaction to this moment of spontaneity. The final stanzas read:

...She fired the gorse - fired too  
One gnarled old bush of Adam's seed  
Which in a cleft of naked need  
Within my soul had fouled indeed  
White purity, and as it grew  
Spread doubts in scent and hue,

Her hand held mine - and then  
The flame leapt in and burnt the bush;  
My soul knew smoke and fire, then hush  
Of clay delivered from the push  
Of Nature's sap; now in God's ken  
I stand unsoiled again,

The flaming gorse bush is meant to recall Exodus 3:2-6, the burning bush which provided proof of God's presence, and reacquainted the tribes of Israel with their divine promise: 'I am come down to deliver them out of

the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them...unto a land flowing with milk and honey'. With this understanding of the fire imagery the lines,

My soul knew smoke and fire, then hush  
Of clay delivered from the push  
Of Nature's sap...

far from being descriptive of orgasmic delight, dramatize a moment of divine intervention in a soul which had begun to lose its faith. The restoration of faith is explicitly stated:

now in God's ken  
I stand unsoiled again,

Perhaps in a secular world such Biblical allusions are more likely to pass unnoticed. Yet, an appreciation of the theological position of the rest of the poems in *The Clay Verge*, ought to be enough to cast doubt on the efficacy of 'literary sensibility' as sufficient in itself for a reading of Clemo's poetry. Clemo, as we have already seen, pays scant regard to traditional cultural connotations, and images are never used to provide connotative resonance. They are there as part of the intellectual argument, much as they are in the poetry of John Donne and George Herbert.

This 'Metaphysical' sympathy is nowhere more evident than in 'Prisoner of God.' Structured as a defendant's speech in a court of law, the poet addresses God, as judge and jury combined, directly. The tone is bitter, reviling. 'Who needs forgiveness now?' the poet taunts in the opening line before setting out the incident which has brought him to the dock. That incident is a failure of faith, or perhaps less seriously, stamina on the poet's part as he waits for his appointed bride. Clemo turns tables upon God and accuses him of reneging on *his* promise. This is followed by a virulent, anguished and detailed account of God's repeated failure to hear the urgency of the poet's need:



You would not hear my voice,  
And how could I hear Yours  
When you were slamming, slamming all my doors?

There may be an allusion here to Clemo's deafness, the 'doors' of aural perception. But knowledge of the poet's physical condition is scarcely necessary to understand the feeling of betrayal these lines communicate. And, the poem insists, it is God who has failed in fidelity towards his subject, not the poet who has fallen short:

With tasteless ironies  
You fill my days for me, this only life  
Which has no choice but has surrendered all  
In trust,...  
What grace do You confer  
Through tricks like these?

The poem closes with a daring exploitation of the concept of divisibility implicit in the doctrine of the Trinity as employed by St John in his *Revelation* 22:3. Here the poet looks forwards to a *final* appeal to Christ over the head of God:

These are my facts, What shall my verdict be,  
Baptized into such sonship, when this gloom  
Breaks at Christ's Judgment-seat which sets me free?

Elsewhere in the poem Clemo telescopes history so that the crucifixion is a contemporary event: 'When in the courtyard the world's hammers rang.../ I was apart with her...' His being with a woman at this moment is meant itself to be a proof of faith. Not deceived by natural theology, he can be wooed only by the God-given 'human flower' referred to in 'Sufficiency'. While Peter denied knowledge of Christ, 'belief', the poet insists, 'Flamed in our kisses'. This true act of faith is then contrasted with the false acts of faith of the established Church:

...these dark corridors awoke  
To other genuflections than are used  
In churches where His truth is bruised  
By scholarship and art,

These lines recall Clemo's letter to the *Cornish Guardian* of 21 April, 1943. (1) One remembers too Garth Joslin's 'experiment in prayer'.

This poem bears the hallmark of seventeenth century Metaphysical poetry, a recognition which could as easily be extended to the majority of *The Clay Verge* poems. But if Clemo's poetry shares characteristics with these poets he acquired them indirectly. For it would seem Clemo did not read poets like John Donne until 1949. (2) The 'metaphysicality' of 'Prisoner of God' and other poems is likely to have been acquired through Clemo's earlier deep study of Francis Thompson whom he had been reading with excitement since 1943. (3) In his reading of Francis Thompson Clemo seems to have reached back beyond him to the originals and created a marriage of religious and erotic Metaphysical poetry: a combination, as it were, of Jack and John. The stanzas from 'The Plundered Fuchsias' will help illustrate this point.

The poem narrates the destruction of the blooms of a fuchsia bush by a child's whim. This destructive act assumes special and specific meaning in Clemo's account. He writes:

Dear God, but it was heaven  
To see her red lips meet  
Those petals with no kiss but glib  
Destructive glee, and cheat  
The bees of their stored sweet,

1. See present paper, p.38. 2. *Marriage*, p.55. *Marriage* does not make it absolutely clear that Clemo had not, to his knowledge read any Donne prior to the winter of 1949. That he had not was clarified in correspondence with the author. 3. 'I discovered Francis Thompson in 1943, drawn to him chiefly because of his sentimental-mystical love for little girls, a counterpart to my own feeling for Barbara and Irene'; letter to the author. The influence of Thompson upon Clemo's poetry will be explored in the next chapter.



She marred the rhythm of the soil,  
She checked fertility,  
And then, the last flower trampled on,  
She turned more naughtily  
And gave her lips to me.

Here we have doctrinal philosophy used to provide the basis for the poet's joy, at both the destruction and the kiss which follows. In 'The Child Traitor' a girl rejects God (and the poet) by picking a flower:

She has turned from God and me  
To pluck a foxglove tenderly.

The Clemo love poem to have received most praise is 'A Calvinist in Love', described by one commentator as 'an extraordinary revival of the Caroline love lyric, an amazingly realistic handling of what had, in the seventeenth century, been mere convention, courtesy, hyperbole'. (1)

This poem stands in relation to the love poems in the same way 'Neutral Ground' does to the more exclusively theological ones: that is it encapsulates their philosophical-aesthetic sub-structure. Not written, it would seem, out of an actual incident, as were the love poems discussed above, the poem seems to relish its rhetorical status. Clemo is enabled to give greater attention to the fluidity of its rhythms, a more playful touch to the persona's voice. Yet, for all the delight this poem affords, it fails to persuade me to suspend my disbelief, as I am persuaded in 'The Child Traitor'. The poem communicates its status as artefact, rather than transcend that status and communicate, as Clemo invariably does, simultaneously on a more direct, existential level:

I will not kiss you, country fashion,  
By hedgesides where  
Weasel and hare  
Claim kinship with our passion

1. Thurley, p.172.

The Spring is not our mating season;  
The lift of sap  
Would but entrap  
Our souls and lead to treason

'A Calvinist in Love' possesses too much of the contrived elegance which distinguishes Caroline from Metaphysical poetry. This is readily apparent if one compares it to 'The New Creation' written in the same month<sup>(1)</sup> but not collected until 1967. The latter poem leans towards the Metaphysical in the earnestness of its voice:

If you were Nature's child  
I could not love you, for I shun  
Corrupted trees and flowers which the sun  
Kindled in disobedience, Neither wild  
Nor tender are the hills,

And in this vein, for fortyeight lines, Clemo mingles vehement opposition to natural theology - 'Hell snickers the chatter of a starling' - frank observation of human sexuality - 'weariness and lack/ And sad inconstancy/ follow beast and man at mating call' - uniquely Calvinist compliments - 'For He Who fashioned creeds to shame the flowers/ Remade you through His stern theologies' - with tender, human feeling - 'Which made you lovable. so that you find/ You are with child by me'. No less a work of rhetoric, as any poem necessarily is, it beguiles one into accepting the credibility of the poem as an act of communication.

Love, for Clemo, was also subject to his theological understanding. But while faith in the cross promised salvation, it did not guarantee a bride. And when, in 1949, Clemo began corresponding with Eileen Funston, he was to find that his view of nature unacceptable to her. In Eileen's

1. Both poems dated from the original manuscripts.



case she was very much nature's child and as much a Christian as Clemo himself. And this unexpected conjunction caused Clemo to rethink the geography of grace he had mapped out in the claylands.

CHAPTER EIGHT  
PRIEST OUT OF BONDAGE

*The Clay Verge* was republished in 1961 with two other short collections under the general title *The Map of Clay*. (1) The three sections of *The Map of Clay* trace Clemo's development from the spiritual and poetic struggle to create out of his native landscape the interpretative key he then needed (*The Clay Verge*), through the use of landscape as doctrinal analogy, (this new development is seen in *The Wintry Priesthood*), and on to his ultimate sloughing of it entirely (*Frontier Signals*). The progression is chronological, and is intimately connected with the impact of Eileen Funston and Clemo's discovery of Karl Barth, and to a lesser degree the American evangelical movement of the fifties. To Eileen Clemo's poetry, that is, the poetry which was subsequently published as *The Clay Verge*, seemed 'hopelessly muddled' in its spiritual values. (2) Her reaction forced him to rethink his use of the claylands. Barth made him aware both of the danger of his position 'as an outsider' (3) and helped him to a firmer grasp of the theology he had carved for himself. (Clemon had in fact read something of Barth as early as 1946. (4))

It is indicative of the radical shift in perspective Clemon experienced between 1949 and 1950 that two of the three poems published in the later sections of *The Map of Clay* which repeat the intense preoccupation with his native landscape, were drafted before 1949 - 'Clay-land Moods' and 'Intimate Landscape' (5) The third, 'Cornish Anchorite', was written in September 1950. Its mood may have been the result of a temporary loss of his new sense of direction. (6) The poem, and its mood, were to serve Clemon well, however, in the poetic sequence *The Wintry Priesthood* which

1, The title was taken from a line of a Charles Causley poem 'Homage to Jack Clemon', *Collected Poems of Charles Causley*, London, 1975. 2, Letter from Clemon to the author. 3, *Gospel*, p.107. 4, *Marriage*, p.38. 5, Dates on the original manuscripts. 6, In *Gospel* Clemon speaks of such a set back, p.65.



traces the kind of 'development of a human soul' Clemo had originally intended for *The Clay Verge*. (Only now the development was to be away from the Christ in the clay-pit, not towards him.) ;

The mood of 'Cornish Anchorite' is decidedly dour. It returns us with a vengeance to the autistic(1) world already explored:

Deep in the clay-land winter lies my brain,  
All faculties that human growth could stain  
Dissolved to weedless nescience; here is soil  
No poet's pen can scratch, no culture's light despoil.(2)

The poet, like a corpse in the grave, waits to be wakened to a new world. He exists in a time, as it were, between Gods:

There is no worship here, only the worm I call  
Original sin, and fire of the Fall.

Such a death, the poet says, is preferable to the living lie of conventional perception. In this state he is 'exempt' from error, 'In Dogma's fold till Nature's rhythms be overpast'. The foulness of the corruption of the physical body purges him of the temptation to return to 'natural piety':

Worm and fire at my roots, how should I know  
Your sunshine, song of your birds, you poet brood?  
How should I share your pagan glow?  
I am beyond your seasons...  
I lapse from Nature towards a birth  
Of heaven's fertility,  
That blasphemes Spring upon your earth.

1. Thurley, p.172. 2. It is possible the poem was inspired by one of Spurgeon's sermons, 'Spiritual Resurrection', *Sermons for Special Occasions*, London, 1977. The sermon dwells with graphic detail on the theme of death and resurrection.

The season of 'Cornish Anchorite' is repeated in the opening line of the next poem, 'The Broad Winter'. 'What isolates me here in frozen clay' the poet asks, thus establishing a sense of continuity between the poems. But the poet is no longer a corpse, or compared with a corpse. He is instead a believer, speaking from the isolation of a faith the world seems to have turned from, to another believer, Charles Spurgeon. (1)

The poem returns Clemo to his old enemy, Liberal Theology. Spurgeon is envisaged as a prophet foretelling the whirlwind that would eventually be reaped by a world that had turned its back upon the God of revelation.

The darkness comes as you foretold,  
You hear the fretful moan,  
The alien winds that rave  
As bitterly the gray truth breaks  
On disillusioned Church and frantic world,

Excessively repetitious in its images of doom, the poem cannot be said to succeed. The failure, I believe, has much to do with the absence from this poem of a suitable geography upon which Clemo can hang his theology. He was still heavily dependent upon geographical metaphors. He thought geographically just as he did theologically. This is evident in the poems dedicated to T.F. Powys and D.H. Lawrence. The former is packed full of geographical metaphors as he compares Powys' struggle with Christianity with his own:

Chalk heart and clay heart share  
A wiful strategy;  
The strife you learned to bear  
Breaks westward over me,

1, Five of these poems are dedicated to religious and literary figures who are important to Clemo. The sequence may be read, therefore, as an attempt to clarify the poet's own position *vis-a-vis* theirs.



But if Clemo still thinks through geography, it is in a slightly different way now: a distinction made above by the phrase 'doctrinal analogy'. (1) Rather than a lived reality, his landscape now offers a preferred way of drawing comparisons. Of Lawrence he writes:

You were a child of the black pit,  
The grimy tunnellings where fuel and treasure  
Are one...

('The Two Beds')

and goes on to account for the attitudes towards human sexuality Clemo believes divides them through the different landscapes in which they were reared. The image of coal, he says to Lawrence, 'Remained with you'. Rather than the 'strange distortions in the hot fumes/ Too near the earth's bowels' which corrupted Lawrence, Clemo grew up amidst clay:

.....high  
On the bare hills, the little breasts  
So white in the sun, all the veins running white  
Down to the broad womb,

Lawrence might have been saved from the error into which Clemo believes he had fallen had he had the geological influence of the latter:

Could light of my clay have fallen  
On your black pit (yet not my light,  
But the light that is not as you supposed;  
I tell you, the Man who died

1. *The Wintry Priesthood* contains only one poem that can be accurately described as a composition of place - a defining characteristic of *The Clay Verge* - 'Clay-land Moods'. And while as a poem it stands equal to the rest in the sequence, it has no natural place there. Its evocation of the spiritual reality of the clayworks suggests its affinity with *The Clay Verge*, as does its date of composition,

Is not as you supposed), why, then,  
Your symbol would have changed...

While critical of Lawrence, it is at the same time sympathetic, showing evidence of the greater tolerance towards him Clemo came to feel.

Thurley believes Clemo to have misrepresented Lawrence in this poem. (1) Thurley's reading of Clemo arises, however, from his belief that Clemo is employing a 'Christian dualism' which opposes the spiritual to the physical. It is Thurley's interpolation of this dualism which leads him to find a 'great paradox' in Clemo's verse. This paradox is that Clemo's 'denial of the physical, proceeds from the greatest concentration on the physical'. (2) But in neither 'The Two Beds' nor 'A Calvinist in Love' (into which Thurley similarly interpolates this dualism) can Clemo be said to be opposing 'the physical'. Rather, he opposes the sensuality of Christian marriage - more specifically the belief in this - to Lawrence's 'sensual theosophy' as he terms Lawrence's sexual theories in 'The Two Beds', a subtle but important distinction we shall return to in Chapter 10.

Nor do I think Clemo can be said to have misrepresented Lawrence. (3) Against the latter's sexual speculations Clemo opposes his own. In their childhood environments he finds symbols for their opposing positions. That both men believed sex to be a route to self-realisation - although this term would have been understood somewhat differently by each - is clear from their published writings. That Lawrence believed it was in 'anal intercourse [that the] fundamental reality is discovered...from which an amoral innocence and liberty' may be learned, has been thoroughly argued elsewhere. (4) The evidence is there in his poetry ('Why Does She Weep', 'Lady Wife', 'Paradise Re-entered', 'New Heaven and New Earth') and novels, notably *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Clemo's rendering of Lawrence's anal orientation through geological metaphors, 'the narrow duct', 'primordial stain', 'the shaft of drugged sense [that leads] to the dead/ Coal forests' seems to me both apposite and elegant.

1. Thurley, p.171. 2. *ibid.*, p.172. 3. He may be accused of giving too great an emphasis to one aspect of Lawrence's thought; but then he was under no obligation in this poem to deal with the entirety of Lawrence. 4. R.E.Fritchard, *op.cit.*, p.50.



There are two other dedicatory poems in *The Wintry Priesthood*, one to Soren Kierkegaard, the other to Karl Barth. The former expresses disagreement with Kierkegaard's rejection of Regine,<sup>(1)</sup> the latter is a benison to the thinker whose theology is seen as the culmination of the work of the Reformation. Barth, even more importantly, is seen within 'The Broadening Spring' as the farther shore to which Clemo has been aiming. Through the influence of Barth, Clemo is enabled to let go the autism and the imagery that had seemed to many friends to be perverse:

The tide has reached me; all my clay is changed;  
The bed and battleground of solitude  
Lie thawed in fellowship; my symbols fade  
In recognition of the Citadel,

'The Broadening Spring', the penultimate in the sequence, looks toward the final poem in its abandonment of the clayscape as a spiritual domain:

My clay-world's cycle is complete at last;  
The icy judgment on these Cornish Alps  
Recedes from mind and spirit as from heart,

Viewed as symptomatic of the isolation into which he had fallen, the land itself, in its rebellion against the laws of nature, is now called a 'Dark, mutinous land', a world of bondage from which the poet is now free ('Priest out of Bondage'). It is a land his faith has outgrown:

...I shared  
Its moods through my dead youth, but I am spared  
To wake and live and know it a husk and tetter  
Which faith and sunrise peel from my soul

1, 'When His grace/ Suffices, as for Paul, He does not bring/ The offer of a thing/ Earthly and fair/ And put within your grasp the lovely form'; 'Thorn in the Flesh',

The poet's debt to Barth is evident not only in the wider perspective shown in Clemo's use of words like 'Citadel' with its implication of community(1). It shows in Clemo's adoption of Barthian vocabulary typical of the latter's *Epistle to the Romans*, (2) and subsequently avoided by Barth. So we find Clemo, in 'Thorn in the Flesh', speaking of 'the Existential Moment', and in 'The Broadening Spring' of 'the Moment' - a variant used again in Clemo's 'The Clay Altar'. And in this new community of faith, within 'the Eternal Moment' ('Priest out of Bondage') of grace, Clemo severs his old affinities:

...I take the irrevocable step beyond  
 Loyalty to this dead land; no longer bone  
 Of my bone is its granite, nor flesh  
 Of my flesh its clay...

Moltmann has written that 'Love is that denial and demolition of the existing order which no revolt can bring about'. (3) Clemo's personal revolt was over, for love had rejected it and theology had shown it to be in error. Henceforward he would eschew the 'curt crumbling jargon of mauled rock' ('Daybreak in Dorset') and seek another means to articulate his twin faiths.

But before we turn to the third section of *The Map of Clay* our attention must be given to 'Clay-land Moods', which makes no attempt to hide its original, Francis Thompson's 'The Hound of Heaven'. (4) Clemo's poem reveals the influence of Thompson in its theme, verse form, content, imagery, vocabulary, and style of alliteration. From the terrible love of God Thompson flies 'Across the margent of the world', while in Clemo's version the spectre drives him 'across the moors of barren trust'. Clemo takes from Thompson the latter's image of the 'following feet' from which there is no escape and writes 'The feet press out until my roots are torn/

1. 'In Christ...I am not only one with God, but, because "with God", one also with the neighbour', Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, New York, 1969, p.495. 2. Between pages 497-498 Barth employs the words 'moment', 'Moment' and 'Eternal Moment' seventeen times, Barth, op.cit. 3. J.Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, London, 1967, p.98. 4. *The Poems of Francis Thompson*, London, 1937.



Caught by the mauling claws'. From the spectre Thompson flees, terrified, hysterical. Clemo writes:

While wrathful vapours writhe  
I creep down rain-grooves, cravenly slink to hide  
In caves of the pit, and bruised with panic prayer  
Unknown to Mammon's sober workmen there,  
I wait till lightnings, thunder-rasps have died  
And God allows His terror-mood to lift  
From off the senseless rift,

The language here shows its debt to Thompson. The alliterative first line of the quotation above is in Thompson's style, as is the abstract image 'panic prayer'.

'Clay-land Moods' differs from its model in a number of respects, too. Thompson's flight through a dream landscape has no parallel here. Clemo's frightening dark night of the soul takes place in daylight, in the real location of the clayworks. Nor does Clemo delay until the end the recognition that the pursuing spectre is God. We are clearly told in line two. Thompson's nightmare vision has much to do with his opium addiction, and the guilt and moral weakness consequent upon it. Clemo's vision makes vivid and intimate the universal guilt of the crucifixion. Toward the end of his vision Clemo suffers the

...taste of blood,  
Anguish that makes each tip-frame a gibbet, bared  
Until I feel on each the swing of my hand, a pale  
Ghost-self of primal guilt that drives the nail,

Recognition is confession, and God, the 'Sphinx' that had pursued him with its terrible claws, appears now as 'mercy' when compared with the wretched mood that comes with recognition of the guilt the poet feels.

Clemon's debt to Thompson is greater than a single poem. His life-long preference for the irregular ode he takes from Thompson. They shared,

too, a feeling for little girls and turned their feeling into poetry. Clemo's 'The Token', (1) 'Plundered Fuchsias' and 'The Child Traitor' have their origins in poems like 'Daisy', 'Poppy' and 'To Olivia'. (2) Clemo manages to avoid the cloying sentimentalism of Thompson's verse, possibly because of the theological vision which interprets the relationships. But Clemo's attachment is as dependent, romantic and misplaced. In 'Daisy' Thompson writes of being made a gift of a little girl's 'winsome mouth/ And a wild strawberry.' (3) Clemo, in 'The Plundered Fuchsias', has the child destroy the bright red flowers before offering her mouth to him.

The attempt to find complete emotional satisfaction in a child is bound to be frustrated: children are superficial creatures and cannot cope with the burden of an adult's emotional demands. Thompson wrote of this several times. Clemo was forced to acknowledge the same difficulty, when he wrote;

This too breaks down and has become a snare;  
 These gambols in the child-world and the rare  
 Sweet insights unforbidden  
 Are suddenly all hidden  
 And crumbled to the old grey-toned despair,

('The Child Traitor')

In 'A Narrow Vessel' Thompson asked himself if he could continue to endure the misery of these relationships:

Can I forget her cruelty?  
 Who, brown miracle, gave you me?

1. This poem appears in *Confession*, p.237. 2. Clemo credits his girl poems to his reading of Browning, *Confession*, pp.236-237. I believe the relevant pages suggest Browning's influence to have been in Clemo's understanding of the significance of the relationships, not on the structure or technique of the poems. 3. Thompson's poems in the genre were possibly all inspired by the daughters of the Meynells, in whose household Thompson lived for much of his adult life.



Or with unmoisted eye think on  
The proud surrender overgone  
(lowlihead in haughty dress)  
Of the tender tyranness?

While Clemo in 'Prisoner of God' was to write:

Who needs forgiveness now?  
For You have prisoned me  
Within the walls of pain-dark misery  
And left her free to vow  
Her life to other ends and so escape  
These damps you chose for me

Clemon's debt to Thompson is even more evident in unpublished works like 'After the Purgation'. In this post-war poem Clemon had written:

So I may feel the sting  
His love whim hardening,  
And gain  
Beyond the bane...

The similarities to the following lines from Thompson's 'Any Saint' do not require commentary:

And thou shalt be fulfilled  
With all sweet things unwilling;  
So best  
God loves to jest...

Curiously, there are even similarities between the two poets in their treatment of nature. Thompson is generally considered a Victorian 'Romantic'. Husslein, for example has said, 'Thompson's approach to nature

is all but infinitely above the wavering vision of Wordsworth'. (1)  
Certainly in poems like 'Field-Flower' and 'To a Snow Flake' Thompson marvels at the Maker's craft. But he distinguished between his approach to nature and that of the Victorian imitators of Romanticism:

I am not of thy fools  
Who goddess thee with imious flatteries sweet,  
Stolen from the little Schools  
Which cheeped when that great mouth of Rydal ceased,  
(Of Nature; Laud and Poet')

In this poem Thompson writes 'Hope not of Nature; she nor gives nor teaches' and again 'She has no hands to bless'. Thompson was, in fact, wary of nature's seductive charms, and, like Clemo, quite unable to name but the commonest of species (2), both facts indicating further sympathetic links between the two men. (A comparative reading of Clemo's autobiographical volumes and the published biographies of Francis Thompson reveals more than a score of similarities either in taste, beliefs or experiences.) In his 'To the Dead Cardinal of Westminster' Thompson goes so far as to speculate that the devotion he has shown to nature and poetry has been to the detriment of his devotion to God, and that he is likely to be punished for this. It is possible, too, that it was from Thompson that Clemo developed his reliance upon the word 'clay', so important and multivalent a term in the latter's work. Clay is used repeatedly by Thompson.

But Clemo was unhappy with his dependence upon Thompson, and by 1950 had discovered and favoured Coventry Patmore. (3) The move from the author of 'Daisy' to the author of *Angel in the House* is expressive of Clemo's determination to become a poet of married love. But technically it could hardly have disturbed his work less: (4) nor did his discovery, in the same

1. Fr J. Husslein, in the Preface to T.L. Connolly's, *Francis Thompson; In His Paths*, London, 1944, p.vii.  
2. J.C. Reid, *Francis Thompson; Man and Poet*, London, 1959, p.59. 3. Letter to the author. 4. Thompson's poetry is heavily indebted to that of Patmore, particularly the latter's use of the ode.



year, of John Donne. (1) Until the mid sixties Thompson was to be the only important influence upon the style of Clemo's work.

*Frontier Signals* lacks the unity of vision of *The Clay Verge* and the unity of purpose of *The Wintry Priesthood*. This is not surprising when one considers that nearly half the poems in this section were written between 1948-51, and the rest sporadically over several years following Clemo's rejection of the claylands. We can date 'Clay Peak', 'Alien Grain', 'Reclaimed' and 'Beyond Trethosa Chapel' to Clemo's productive post war period. (2) 'The Meteorite' was first published in the *Devon & Cornwall Journal*, Winter 1951. 'Intimate Landscape' was a very early poem (3), and 'Tregarthen Shadow' exists in a 1951 rough draft.

In amongst these poems is a small group which records the enormous impact the British tours of American Evangelists had upon Clemo. The poem 'Lunar Pentecost', dedicated to Renee Martz, witnesses not only to the excitement Clemo experienced, but also records Clemo's partial recovery of hearing at this time (4):

1. This claim needs to be squared with Clemo's statement that it was his reading of Donne during the winter of 1949-50 that produced 'a major spurt of poetry-writing...' in which he 'produced half the poems in *The Wintry Priesthood* and also...' 'Shuttered', *Marriage*, p.56. With respect to the possibility of Donne's having influenced *The Wintry Priesthood*, Chapter Seven has shown Clemo was writing 'Metaphysically' four years before he encountered the works of John Donne. The seventeenth century elements of the style of those poems, less pronounced in fact than in *The Clay Verge* cannot therefore be attributed to his reading of Donne. Evidence for Thompson's technical influence exists; in Donne's case it does not. Having said that, the opening couplet of 'Shuttered' testifies to an affectionate acquaintance with Donne's work, there is a 1966 manuscript version of this poem in the print style adopted by Clemo after his blindness. This version was published in *Unicorn* in December 1960. I have not been able to find, amongst Clemo's papers, an earlier version of 'Shuttered'. The differences between the 1950 and 1960 versions remains unknown. The poem shares none of the characteristics of his fifties poetry and all the characteristics of his sixties work. In conclusion, Clemo's reading of Donne seems to have encouraged him to write a number of poems within a few days of each other. This is proof of his admiration for John Donne, not of the latter's influence upon Clemo's poetry. The opening couplet of 'Shuttered' is, however, somewhat reminiscent of Donne. 2. First two dated by original manuscripts; second two dated in *Marriage*, p.75. 'Alien Grain' was first published in *The Cornish Review*, Spring, 1950. 3. *Marriage*, p.27. 4. *ibid.*, p.101.

A fire-flake has pierced my silence,  
And a tongue responds - too deep  
To be greyly solemn, too sure  
Of heaven's glowing heart to let me sleep.

Written in November 1956 it shows Clemo working free of clayland imagery. Loosely based on the symbol of fire as a manifestation of grace (we have already seen it employed this way in 'The Burnt Bush'), Clemo attempts to recreate the experience of being spiritually 'born again'. Such an experience is compared to a volcanic eruption that can literally recast a landscape's geography, a fitting metaphor in Clemo's case. It symbolizes the impossibility of return to his former self and the poetry it produced: 'I shall not find the way back/ To the crag's lip and the wintry bruise'.

The revivalist caravans, which he followed in the national, and religious, press had revived memories of childhood meetings where joy and brotherhood had been the key characteristics of faith. The grim and lonely worship he had made out of the clayworks is rejected as false:

...Now I feel  
God's gay eruption is bedrock truth  
Our stoic attitudes conceal,

Clemon felt a need to be part of this fundamentalist Christian revival. He conceived the idea for *The Invading Gospel* during Billy Graham's tour.<sup>(1)</sup> That book, while it read as an autobiography of its author's spiritual life, was conceived as a 'Christian manifesto'.<sup>(2)</sup> He sought to turn his poetic skills to the cause, too; not always with happy results:

Love's a natural ocean, faith a foreign fire,  
Yet the two are blended in the coffee bar...

('Linked Up', in *I Proved Thee at the Waters*, p.33)

1, *Marriage*, p.89. 2, *Gospel*, p.6.



Clemo's difficulty during the fifties was that he had undergone enormous changes. His faith was now readily identifiable as orthodox; and evangelical in its joy. His life was now peopled exclusively by adults. He had reviled his old treatment of nature and the claylands. Clemo as a poet had to recreate himself because the Clemo of the claylands seemed now an inadequate, even a distorted, version of his faith, and because the old imagery was inappropriate to the poetry he now wanted to write. He needed, as it were, a new palette. This complex of ideas finds expression in 'The Veiled Sitter' written at the time his friend Lionel Miskin undertook to paint Clemo's portrait. 'Pile on flamboyant colour' he urges the artist:

....show my soul  
Retrieved from the dead grey mask!  
Bring Van Gogh riot to the task...

He tried to find a musical analog for the new way he experienced his faith, in part, perhaps, because that faith had restored his hearing sufficient for him to hear music if not the human voice. In 'Lunar Pentecost' he had spoken of 'jazz-fire' and 'hot rag-time'. The following year in 'Beyond Lourdes' he speaks directly of the 'truth' beyond the suffering soul:

Faith has schooled me further, brought me round  
To the secret you may have lost  
Through your suffering; heaven's vivacity...

And jazz is employed once again as analog for the pentecostal fire of faith:

Bernadette, on your bleak verge  
You could scarcely dream  
How a jazz-throb gives the ultimate purge;  
How the Cross bends closer to the neon-gleam  
Than to the grim grotto...

One cannot ignore the faults in this poem; the audacity with which he scolds a saint; the implied superiority of his spiritual understanding; the anachronism, the appropriation of images of superficiality and trivia - certainly with respect to 'neon-gleam' if not to jazz - to represent the highest spiritual insights. And these faults are directly traceable to the poet's having tried to work without regard to his clayland imagery. Interestingly, it is the poems published in *Frontier Signals* that were written following his romance with Eileen Funston and before the distraction of the Graham and Martz campaigns, that better traced the route his poetry was to take. 'Reclaimed' for example, places the poet squarely in his old domain:

I stand alone  
On the dark rain-broken cone,  
Rejoicing in a kindred nakedness...

But here, his reading of the landscape has changed. Rather than glory in the industrial scab's continuing contamination of the surrounding beauty, it is the reclamation of the industrial terrain that serves as an image of grace. A similarly revised perspective is employed in 'Goonvean Claywork Farm', which finds in the destruction of his grandparents' farm a metaphor for the 'natural destiny' which awaited him as a Clemo. Grace this time is imaged in the farm's stable:

There was still a mark of grace;  
Though the orchard fell the stable stayed;  
To this day it stands with its sweet warm straw,  
The black trucks baulked ten yards away,

His imagination still moved in the claylands: he thought through its shapes. Only a new landscape could free him from the lure and the limitations of the old one, and only a lover could provide that landscape. As he was to write twenty years later in 'St Gildas: 'No place can touch



me/ Unless I know a great soul touched it'. In 1951, for a brief period, Clemo had romantic hopes across the border in Dorset. This was also the time when, through his friendship with Monica Hutchings, Clemo had a rare opportunity to travel. Monica escorted Clemo and his mother into Hardy territory - Powys territory too, and Clemo experienced the thrill of having tea with the novelist whom he had admired for so many years. For a short while it seemed as though the contradictory forces within him - ascetic and sensualist, religious and iconoclast, artist and puritan - could, indeed, be reconciled:

Mediate, then, beloved; let tension cease,  
Dune-grit and pews be reconciled;  
Let not the peak be cut away,  
Nor the fold reviled,  
Harsh clang of the prophetic tip  
May yet be blent, through you,  
With hymn of fellowship.

It was not to be, and Clemo was to have to wait twelve more years until he was offered a new lover and a new landscape. But the deep yearning he had to be able to articulate his new understanding of, and his new confidence in, his faith seemed intimately bound up with those confirmations, romantic and literary, on the other side of the Cornish-Devon border. And these factors helped him in his struggle to turn from the landscape which had made him a poet. 'Daybreak in Dorset', written after his visit to T.F.Powys, speaks of the rolling green hills he had travelled over that day as auguries of a new future:

Fate-ridden land, in Hardy's view,  
Yet every mood I have glimpsed today  
On Dorset's face, each passionate hue,  
Puts my bleak fate away.

The poem invests each scene with prophetic light:

I have seen the moment fret  
When thundery rain half vexed the little Stour  
.....  
And I have seen  
Fair golden evening drowse on Bulbarrow Hill  
.....  
And in each new discovery, each tumultuous thrill,  
There was no place  
For fear of shaping scourge, though Tess's frail  
Sad ghost might haunt the mind,

So determined was Clemo to replace his clayland vision with another that he claimed, prematurely, in this poem: 'I am purged now/ Even of my purgation'. But such moments were hopeful projections of what a new vision of landscape might offer, not the work of a poet sure of his relationship to it. And trips like these, while offering him an insight into an alternative poetry, were of too short a duration for him to be able substantially to build upon them. Then fate, ever ready to crush him it seems with further ironies, stepped in yet again. His sight began seriously to fail him. By 1956 he was blind, and he would never be able to see the landscapes of grace upon which he had come to believe his future as a poet would depend.



CHAPTER NINE  
NO SULLEN CRAFT

Without access to a new landscape Clemo could only continue to write - with the exception of his few experiments in a non-topographical style - on the basis of the stored mental images culled from the claylands. And after his experiments of 1956-58 this is what he did. Now further handicapped by blindness, Clemo returned to the kind of reworking of that landscape's significance we observed in 'Reclaimed'. That landscape, like his earlier Calvinism, is seen as excessive in its violence to normative standards:

I have known the clay-crabs' tactics all my life,  
Been tolerant and made them my symbols;  
But I can no longer praise  
For the claw-beaten flower, the shell-snapped tree,  
Too much of beauty was nipped and slowed  
In the intricate strife;  
What maimed the bloom has blocked the chapel road,

('Crab Country', *Cactus on Carmel*)

In 1963 Mary Wiseman came into the poet's life, determined to take him to her beloved Lake District and convert a poet obsessed with industrialism into a nature-lover after her own heart. Clemo's second volume of autobiography fully acknowledges her influence. He relates there how she acted as critic to his work and would 'pounce on a jerky rhythm, a stale adjective'.<sup>(1)</sup> She desired from him a less subjective poetry: '"I want you to write poems *for* me, not *about* me"' she told him. (page 120) But Clemo had been blind for almost ten years. He could no longer read. From where was he to obtain the imagery she demanded for a new kind of poetry?

Clemon has described Mary as a woman with 'force of character'. (page 116)

1, *Marriage*, p.120; page numbers in the text of this chapter are from *Marriage*.

and she duly set about establishing the changes she wanted. Clemo, despite some hesitation, was prepared to go along with her demands. At her request he visited the Lake District, where Mary ingeniously overcame the problem of his blindness. She 'wrote constantly' on his palm, Clemo explains - the system of communication his mother had devised - 'describing the scenery, the shapes of the mountains as they came into sight...around the fissured base of Langdale...she put my hand on the delicate rowans and into the turbulent beck'. (page 121) Poems like 'Grasmere Reflections', 'Dungeon Ghyll' and 'Friar's Crag' witness to her ability to communicate and Clemo's willingness to respond.

This method of communication, a combination of palm writing and tactile experience, was to be taken up later by Ruth Peaty. It proved an adequate substitute as the many descriptive poems written since this time testify. It is impossible from the texts themselves to tell the poet was blind and deaf. Not only does visual description play an integral part in so many of his poems from 1964 onwards, it is often the dominant means of expression, as it had been in *The Map of Clay*:

Roots of bamboo, eucalyptus, palm,  
Curl towards buried Cornish saints;  
Exotic leaves twang a jungle prayer  
Above the river-bed now drained at ebb-tide,  
Where boats lounge on mud-banks and wait  
For the gurgling inwash from Falmouth Bay.

('St Just-in-Roseland', *The Echoing Tip*)

'Sandsfoot Castle Gardens' contains a brief reference to this method of communication. Ruminating on the decades of 'pain and mirage, the rotten clay-fields', Clemo concludes that he no longer cares for an explanation. As soon as the rain lifts he will be back outside again, with his wife, experiencing the richness of the natural world:



I hardly care where the blame goes;  
Five pattering minutes more  
And we shall caress together  
The laughing tongue of the palm tree,  
The damp full lip of the rose  
( 'Sandsfoot Castle Gardens' )

His poetry makes use of sound, too. In 'Porthmeor Cemetry' Clemo writes:

...My audacious luck  
Shines crisp and golden as the beach below,  
Sings in the surf and shells,,,

while in 'Chesil Beach' Clemo incorporates tactile, aural and visual references - including colours - to paint a word picture of the coastal headland:

My feet tread the fragmented crust,  
Slipping between enormous pebbles massed  
In salty dyke-piles above the checked flow  
That crawls and cranes through crannies, its Channel-powered jabs  
Dislodging some lower slabs  
With a dull submerged rattle. The mile-long heap  
Has no angles or splinters; the pebbles, fawn or grey,  
Shine smooth, rounded like eggs, stacked in shrill profusion  
Near the dignified west curve of Weymouth Bay.

Mary insisted Clemo learn Braille and they 'developed the habit of reading the same book simultaneously and discussing it', (p.122) Clemo reading a Braille edition while Mary read a printed copy. With access opened to other people's lives it was now possible for him to write beyond his own experience. 'The Riven Niche' and 'Charlotte Nicholls' were the first poetic results of this practice.(1) It was to be the beginning of

1, Dated by manuscripts.

two new genres for Clemo, the dramatic monologue and the portrait. He had attempted something akin to the latter in the dedicatory poems of *The Map of Clay*. But the poet was to be less in evidence now, and frequently entirely absent from the text of the poem.

It was again Mary who persuaded Clemo to 'modernize' his style. This may have been the first occasion on which Clemo consciously considered the craft he employed. It is worth noting that Clemo has never written about the craft of poetry: *Marriage of a Rebel* contains only two sentences concerned with this issue, and they are contained in the pages narrating Mary Wiseman's influence. She encouraged him to read, among others, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, T.S.Eliot. 'Eros in Exile', a product of this development, marks a radical departure from the end-line rhymes and regular iambics of previous work. The poem displays a keen 'auditory imagination'.<sup>(1)</sup> Lines such as the following have no precedent in his work:

Heavy air from mouldering clay-hills  
Fills the harbour and threatens the embrace,  
Nuptial bud at the lips  
Slips back into the natural stream  
.....  
.....Male tower, female flower,  
Cower in the grey light, Pride of the copse  
Drops...

The poem even approximates a musical quality through careful selection and arrangement of consonants:

Another cry, a tie with another temple  
More deeply penetrating;  
By the rivers of Babylon...

Clemon's vocabulary has also been enriched, allowing him greater subtlety

1, The term is taken from T.S.Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, London, 2nd ed., 1964.



and complexity of expression::

Opaque dull gloss of instinctive waters  
Suddenly untransmuted....

Two visits to the Lake District provided him with the new landscape he needed. But with their relationship increasingly beset with uncertainties on both sides, the beauties of Westmoreland, so unlike the country in which his faith had been formed, seemed at times to be not only alien, but menacing. In 'Cactus' Clemo notes, 'beauty steals and betrays', while in the love poem 'Dungeon Ghyll' he asks:

Why should there be beauty  
On the lip of the ledge where you're tempted?  
There could be nettles and a thorn hedge  
To keep you safe,  
Down at the base, at your innocent meeting-point.

In 'Friar's Crag' Clemo compares their relationship with that of Ruskin and Rose La Touche. 'Grasmere Reflections' explores through Wordsworth's life the bewitchment from faith that, for him, is Romanticism. But there were happier days too. Days in which it seemed that this relationship, for all its troubles, doubts, and fierce arguments, (p.120) would be the fulfilment of a life-time's faith. There was still an enormous gap to bridge, as Clemo admits in 'Lines to Wordsworth':

I reached truth through my world's industrial fray,  
And scorned the placid breathing of the soul  
Within its natural dream.

For the relationship to work, Clemo had to bridge that gap, and find in natural beauty an analog of truth. He could do it only through love. Not love of nature, but love of Mary. At times it seemed possible. To Wordsworth he says:

...now your hills  
Flash on my heart, trance-sweet with new control.  
Meridian grace has reconciled our lands...

It may have been Clemo's study of Eliot which prompted the use of desert images in three poems, 'Cactus', 'Cactus in Clayscape' and 'The Leper'. But whereas Eliot employed such a landscape as expressive of the spirit of the twentieth century, for Clemo it serves to communicate only a crushing sense of uncertainty and isolation. Clemo is the cactus:

...alone in gulley sand,  
Apart from the common shadow  
Of outcasts inarticulate...  
( 'Cactus' )

'Cactus in Clayscape' possibly records Clemo's lowest moment, when the contradictions with which his relationship with Mary Wiseman had beset him seemed to threaten the foundations of his world. The poem begins by setting out Clemo's purpose in life:

To know the God Who answers by fire,  
To pray for rain and flee from Jezebel;  
The cactus throbbed at voice and footfall  
Of these prophetic urges,

The poem records the depression Clemo was prone to when his predestinated tasks seemed futile and vain in a world determined to interpret life differently:

The cactus prayed for death  
Because the elect were too few for the battle,  
And the priests of the evolving light,  
The pruned approach, the sleek interpretation  
Ran glib and gloating over the holy mount,



It is still sexual union, the 'spiritual biology' he spoke of in *The Invading Gospel*, that is seen as the key to transformation. A capacity in love not only to change one man's fate but to disrupt the pattern of the universe:

The cactus would stab to save the primal mountain  
For the true fire, the pure rain, the embrace  
Of the holy Queen, conceived without stain,  
Who halts the advance of man and nature  
With a humbling flash in which they are emptied,  
Re-fertilized and born again.

'The Leper' poignantly conveys Clemo's sense of rejection. It speaks of 'sheltered church-buds' which:

...took the prudent course,  
Leaving the leper-stem unfit,  
Unhealed and brideless, praying in the slag  
Still, for the pure, straight limb.

This poem more than anything else Clemo has written reveals the desperation with which the poet sought marriage. Its importance went beyond companionship and sexual fulfilment. It was conceived as a form of healing, curing the poet, one may suspect, of the contamination of his father's blood-line.

The evidence for Eliot's influence is not strong, although Clemo's adoption of the wasteland is indicative. The only definite evidence occurs in 'The Islets' (*The Echoing Tip*), where Clemo paraphrases a haunting couplet from Eliot's 'The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock' (1) when he writes:

The polished masters came and went  
Leaving the correct frail monument.

1, *Collected Poems*, London, 1953.

Of the poets Clemo studied during the mid-sixties it is Dylan Thomas who seems to have made the greatest impact upon him. Not that Clemo felt a kinship with Thomas as a man: 'I Go Gentle' is a direct refutation of Thomas's attitude towards death, as expressed in 'Do Not Go Gentle'. Clemo would surely have taken a dim view of the Welsh poet's life, seeing in it another confirmation of the dangers of natural theology. But the poetry, for all that, struck a chord. There is much in Thomas's poetic artillery Clemo does not imitate; for example, the use of 'puns, portmanteau words, paradox...paranomasia, slang...dialectical words, cliches, words based on hidden metaphors, common words with uncommon meanings, grammatical shifts and wrenched syntax' to repeat Moynihan's list of features characteristic of Dylan Thomas's work.<sup>(1)</sup> But Clemo during the sixties began to employ a phrasing either directly adapted from Thomas or heavily indebted to him. In 'Grasmere Reflections' for example Clemo writes 'The belled song tongued by the pregnant Loire', which would seem to be a close reworking of Thomas's title 'It is the Sinner's Dust-tongued Bell'. It was a phrase Thomas used with variants elsewhere in his work: for example in 'After the Funeral' he wrote 'wood-tongued virtue'. In 'Cactus' Clemo has 'moon-drawn gland' a phrase which has no precedent in his work, but which is close to Thomas's 'moon-drawn grave' in 'Grief Thief of Time'.

There are other cases in which while an original cannot be traced to Thomas, the latter's style of phrasing, a combination of surprising verbs and nouns, often made to dance on a rhythm typically Thomasian, has been imitated. One can scarcely think of an alternative source for the phrase with which Clemo describes Sunday lovers slipping from the crowd for a moment's intimacy. They go, Clemo says, 'To stir tides in field gateways' ('Crab Country'). While 'I winged to a weekday service' sounds as though directly snatched from 'Poem in October'. The line 'the birds of the winged trees flying my name' or possibly:

1, William Moynihan, *The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas*, London, 1966, p.78.



Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother  
Through the parables  
Of sunlight  
And the legends of the green chapels

may have served as the conscious or unconscious models.

Thomas seems to have had a lasting, if less obvious, influence upon Clemo's poetry, too. There is little in the latter's phrasing, use of rhythm, or vocabulary after the experimentation of the sixties which recalls Thomas. But several of Clemo's later poems seem written as though answering those of Thomas. 'I Go Gentle' has already been mentioned. But more subtle in its relationship to Thomas's work is Clemo's 'Bedruthan' (*Broad Autumn*). If one reads Clemo's poem and then turns to Thomas's 'We Lying By Seasand', there is a definite correspondence. The poems share a common location and characters, husband and wife. Thomas's poem closes with the recognition that the poet has no power to protect the relationship from future troubles, imaged as falling rock and an impending storm:

But wishes breed not, neither  
Can we fend off rock arrival,  
Lie watching yellow until the golden weather  
Breaks, O my heart's blood, like a heart and a hill.

The couple in Clemo's poem, having survived their time of testing, relax in a freak of 'Riveria weather'. They:

Have survived erosion and the snap of mishap;  
...[and] smile, sharing what's left, still full beyond the storm-wrack.

In similar fashion Clemo's 'A Wife on an Autumn Anniversary' can be read as a reply to Thomas's 'On a Wedding Anniversary'. The poems share the use of rain as image of marital trouble, and name the years they have been together. And again where Thomas concludes on a sad note:

Too late in the wrong rain  
They come together whom their love parted;  
The windows pour into their heart  
And the doors burn in the brain,

Clemo's poem, spoken in the voice of his wife, Ruth, ends:

Five years with your positive bright leaves!  
.....Our earth grieves  
Within the golden humour  
Rayed from soul's heaven's unshifting heat,

The style of Clemo's poetry was not to experience permanent change after the sixties. The first flush of technical experimentation faded, leaving traces upon a technique which still recalls his immediate post-war work. The experiments in portraiture and dramatic monologue (something he would have been familiar with as a reader of Robert Browning) made possible after he learned to read Braille, were, on the other hand, to become a permanent and important facet of Clemo's poetry. The major change the reader is likely to detect is a new confidence evident in *The Echoing Tip* and after. On the 26th October 1968 Jack Clemo married Ruth Peaty. From that day on he ceased to be a man looking forward, searching for a God and a wife, for a destiny other than the natural destiny all mankind is subject to. His poetry became, to borrow a system of classification devised by Dorothy L Sayers, a poetry no more of search, but of statement.<sup>(1)</sup>

1, Dorothy L Sayers, *The Poetry of Search and The Poetry of Statement*, London, 1963.



CHAPTER TEN  
AS LOVE RANG COSMIC

Elect for marriage - I sang  
That stubborn theme through three decades  
Of hunger, mirage, avalanche,,,

('Wedding Eve')

For thirty years marriage had been the destination Clemo had sought. Following his marriage to Ruth Peaty it became his place of residence. It lead him to write a number of poems celebrating marriage, one of which, and perhaps surprisingly, was in honour of Princess Anne's marriage. No longer an outsider, he was keen to affirm a place for himself within the established pattern. And so in 'Royal Wedding' we find the poet who had denounced all ritual asserting, with regard to the processions, regalia, procedures and offices of this wedding:

This is no hollow pomp, this is root and haven,  
The sane oasis where hearts pause and listen  
To the intoning tongue of half-forgotten springs,  
The deep historic soundings  
From the rock-base, at the courtly arrival,

But he carefully delineated the traditions he was prepared to embrace. Not only did he affirm only what was 'Northern and Christian', his affirmation of the institution of marriage was specific, tracing a line from 'Browning and Tennyson who showed what the *English* meant by marriage'. (My italics.) His insistence here upon 'Englishness' firmly dissociates him from his Mediterranean-Celtic ancestors, (1) that 'ancestral-mesh' he had

1. See *Marriage*, p.94.

struggled so long to be free of.

It was Clemo's marriage which made possible the final rejection of the claylands. Clemo had ended his first volume of autobiography, which had stopped at the publication of *Wilding Graft*, on a note which is not repeated until the poems written after his marriage. He had written of his youthful struggles with faith that he had been learning 'unconsciously' how to fit in 'at the one point in the universe where to fit in is to be saved'.<sup>(1)</sup> But as 'Cactus in Clayscape', 'Cactus' and 'The Leper' have shown, faith was not enough. Clemo could only be 'Re-fertilized and born again' if he were embraced by 'the holy Queen'. Without that he was still contaminated like a leper, still an outcast.

It is the importance of the poet's sense of his contamination, (he had described himself in 'Cactus' as 'The scabrous issue'), of the stigma which set him not only apart from the herd but even 'Apart from the common shadow/ Of outcasts inarticulate' which we now need to explore in order to satisfactorily account for his embrace of all the rituals, trappings, offices and traditions which he had formerly denounced in poems like 'Christ in the Clay-pit'.

In the novels Clemo had written in the thirties and forties he had constructed a set of meanings in which the hero was defined by the separation of self and society. What society valued, the hero eschewed. In the poetry Clemo wrote immediately after the war this characteristic was associated with the poetic persona. According to the sociologist and anthropologist Mary Douglas all systems of interpreting the world are founded upon 'the relation of self to society'.<sup>(1)</sup> That Clemo felt himself *doubly* alienated from the society around him would be, according to Mary Douglas's analysis of social cosmologies, potentially as significant as the uniqueness of the clayland's topography or Clemo's reading in theology. I emphasize 'doubly' because Clemo felt tainted by his Clemo blood-line, and distinguished by the promise his mother had received on his behalf from God. According to Mary Douglas:

alienation from the current social values usually takes a set

1. *Confession*, p.246. 2. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, London, 1973, p.174.



form; a denunciation not only of irrelevant rituals, but  
of ritualism as such; exaltation of the inner experience and  
denigration of its standardized expressions...rejection of  
mediating institutions, rejection of any tendency to allow habit  
to provide the basis of a new symbolic order.(1)

This well describes the poetry of *The Clay Verge*.

Douglas was particularly interested in the way the human body was employed by cultures and social sub-groups as a metaphor for themselves. She writes that 'the human body is always treated as an image of society' and adds that 'there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension'.(2) Groups which feel themselves under threat from outside engage upon a symbolic 'rejection of what is external, the empty shell, the husk, the contamination of the senses' and will place 'strict controls' upon 'bodily enjoyment and on the gateways of sensual pleasure'.(3) The orifices of the human body are seen as conduits through which the outside world may enter and contaminate. When Clemo has his clay-tip worker's waggon 'Smack the surrounding foliage as it whirrs', when he delights in the destruction of natural growth, he is preventing the claywork's contamination by the natural world which surrounds it. When in 'The Cinder-heap' he has the twenty year old dump anthropomorphically cower:

...in vague watchfulness and fear  
As brambles straggle clear,  
Pushing with live brown claws  
From the hard refuse...

one can find in this cinder-heap a metaphor for the human body and its orifices under sensual attack. One can even begin to identify an allegorical structure in which the cinder-heap represents, if not the poet, then, masculinity under assault from the feminine which, in this poem, is represented by nature. The poem continues:

1. *ibid.*, p.40. 2. *ibid.*, p.98. 3. *ibid.*, p.177.

And the world of refuse feels the alien sting  
In the crumpled cleft,  
In the warmth of Spring,

This poem, and one may find confirmation in many of the other poems of *The Clay Verge* does indeed display a concern with fears of contamination and the need strictly to control the organs of sensual delight. In Clemo's symbolic system it is the pure, white clay which suffers the threat of contamination from 'the living sap'. As we noted in Chapter Six the claylands became a 'neutral ground' safe from the world around it.

Because Douglas believes that the body is universally employed as a metaphor for social relations, it follows that it can be used to express both alienation and integration. The difference being that they 'imply different uses of the body as a symbolic mode'.<sup>(1)</sup> We should expect to find in the poetry Clemo wrote after his marriage 'a different symbolic mode' to represent his changed status as a man no longer an outsider and, because sanctified by marriage, no longer fearful of physical contamination. Before demonstrating that this is the case, it would be helpful to look briefly again at the poetry written between *The Clay Verge* and *The Echoing Tip*

Clemon rejected the sensual, fallen world and the cultural institutions and artefacts predicated upon it. But he was in a double bind, being both his father's son - and the poetry of *The Clay Verge* is much preoccupied, as are Clemon's autobiographical volumes, with a concern for an inherited 'cycle[s] of savagery' or a 'barbarous bond' as he expressed it in 'Priest out of Bondage' - and child of a divine promise, (*Confession* page 21). In the poem 'Beyond Trethosa Chapel' he had pleaded to be shown that 'Bethel wine is red', a need, that is, for acceptance of his sexual nature. But, as the poems of *Cactus on Carmel* show, he refused to accept it himself. He sought 'nettles and a thorn hedge' to keep him 'safe,/ Down at the base, at...[the]...innocent meeting-point'. He could be neither his father's son, nor live free of 'the great evils in life'.<sup>(2)</sup> Only marriage, and

1. *ibid.*, p.179. 2. *I Proved Thee at the Waters*, p.10



a special kind of Christian marriage, a 'trans-sexual' union which was guaranteed 'incorruptible' (1) could save him from careering into the Scylla of sensuality or the Charybdis of chastity. Such a marriage would enable him to *deny himself even while enjoying himself*, as Clemo was to repeat in *The Invading Gospel*. (2) In 'Testament' (*Broad Autumn*) he would describe this as 'wave after wave/ Of pleasure' which both released and interpreted the newly 'opened wealth' of his body. That theology and sexuality are here intimately connected is made apparent in the implied comparison between the two men with whom Clemo ends this poem:

...So there came to your parish(3)  
 What old defiant Knox found in Margaret,  
 What Burns sought with tears at Mary's grave,

Within the security of that marriage one can sense a tendency to reduce the theological preoccupation, so long foremost in his work. It is there, but complementary, rather than superordinate, to the sexual. In the poem 'In Roche Church' Clemo appears to dismiss the significance of the ideological underpinning - carried here metaphorically through the geographical terms. He writes:

...our way...is a faith transcendent  
 .....  
 ...We are too intent  
 On the unseen touch, angel's wing, communion with a soul-mate,  
 To care whether our rescued feet  
 Tread sand or rock or moorland spur  
 Or the paved church,

We are used by now to Clemo using geological terms as ideological underpinnings. Here he disavows all securities, foundations, (including the church) and apparently privileges love alone. Further support for this

1, *Gospel*, p.81; and see present paper, page 49. 2, *ibid*, p.75. 3, This poem is dedicated and addressed to Joseph Hocking.

interpretation can be found in 'Herman Melville'. Ostensibly a dramatic monologue spoken by the author of *Moby Dick*, it reveals as much about its author. In face of the 'hideous wrangle/ [which] Hardens the world' the speaker has withdrawn. The refuge to which he retreats is his

...wife the true surrendered island,  
The sole, frail hint of palm and throne,

That the wife is spoken of as an island may be said to be doubly significant. She is both a retreat, a refuge from the world, and an image of another order, an order in which sexual experience is purged of all stain. This was Clemo's private adaptation of the doctrine of election. This more important 'act of faith' was obscured in *The Map of Clay* where it was heavily overlaid with a radical orthodox Calvinism. From the time of Clemo's first mature romance the Christian aspect of his work becomes less pronounced although never absent, and a search for a safe domestic normality is increasingly in evidence.

From the 1967 'Charlotte Nicholls' to later poems like 'Sandsfoot Castle Gardens' and 'Chesil Beach' it is the drive to be free of the guilt and stain of a fallen moral inheritance which motivates his poetry. In embracing marriage, Clemo has Charlotte Bronte reject all mystical and supernatural forces, finding 'the ultimate' in 'parish visitation' and 'the content/ Of common housewives in the village'. Marriage, not spiritual or aesthetic transcendence, guarantees the 'oasis' of peace from his family ghosts; the 'scummed saddlebacks' of his 'genesis', as he put it in 'Testament', *Broad Autumn*.

Following his marriage, Clemo began to re-evaluate his geographical metaphors for grace once again, and one finds, as Douglas's theory would predict, an openness of imagery, a receptivity to that which exists in the shared, public domain which was previously absent. In 'Chesil Beach' the poet describes his fearful heritage:



Freak and chaos  
Were the criminals' heritage and mine,  
Since we were not of docile grain,...

But unlike the criminals, Clemo, cleansed by 'human love's vivacity',  
is able to:

...innocently scramble  
From primeval pebbles to the brisk normal road,

The phrase 'primeval pebbles' is a geological metaphor for his atavistic family traits. The 'brisk normal road' implies a communal, shared, public domain. (We shall return to Clemo's integrative use of landscape in Chapter Twelve). This sense of integration comes not through a shared Christian faith but through the confirmation of what in 'Harpoon' Clemo refers to as his 'fantastic inner fable'. This poem, with its imagery of 'ancestral stench', expresses an equal fascination with an assumed tawdry sexual heritage and the possibility of liberation from it by means of 'a new mouth'. 'Harpoon' he writes, 'means swoon, then richer loveliness'. In 'A Couple at Fowey' he speaks of the 'youthful incubus' left in the past as he enters into his 'fused worlds'. This fear of unrestrained sexuality combined with a yearning for sexual fulfilment runs throughout Clemo's poetry. This is the dualism which can be identified in *The Map of Clay*. It is evident again in *Cactus on Carmel* in the struggle to accept Mary Wiseman, whose sexual acceptability, like the landscape with which it was identified, remained problematic. The struggle between sexual pleasure and sexual guilt is the subject of 'Confessional' where the poet ponders whether his beloved is 'True bride or siren'.

It occupies an important part of 'In Harlyn Museum' (*Broad Autumn*), a poem which at first sight appears little more than nostalgia. But this visit by the married poet back to the museum he had enjoyed so much as a child, offers once again, for him, an image of the two alternative sexualities which had fought so determinedly for possession of

his body and soul. He stares at the 'delicate white curve' of the skull of a young woman exhibited there and wonders in what pagan forms her sexuality found expression:

...Did she tramp inland,  
Perform weird rites on the knoll  
We call Brown Willy, her dark breasts stripped  
In frenzy at full moon?

Looking at the 'blank jaw-bones grin' he imagines the lips which once would have been 'pressed out for love'. And for Clemo, regardless of whether she had lived as 'Bride, and mother, tribal whore [or] priestess' she would have been a slave because subject to:

Pagan gods, blood-tides groping  
Among crumbled stones, flesh hurt  
In the unholy lover's hand,

A similar judgment is passed on the Greek poetess Sappho in 'Leucadian Cliff' (*The Echoing Tip*).

Christianity, then, is inseparable from Clemo's vision of redeemed sexuality and marriage. He was brought up as a Methodist and duly imbued with a proper sense of sin. But he constructed his own route to redemption in the early years of the thirties, when he was least sympathetic to Christian teaching: to say he had rejected it would, as the earlier chapters of this paper make clear, be going too far. But it is possible to suggest, indeed, necessary to recognise, that his preferred doctrine of the Christian faith, Calvinism, was incorporated into his private 'religion', his attempt to recreate himself in an image he could tolerate, at a later stage as the narrative of *Confession of a Rebel*, perhaps unwittingly, reveals. Calvinism provided a paradigm for his own sense of sin and desire for purgation: his personal damnation mirrored in the damnation of mankind:



I found God's pathway through your touch;  
Men call it carnal, but He made it much,

( 'Shuttered' )

These lines fascinatingly recall a 1934 poem, the surviving fragment of which has already been quoted (present paper, page 48). In both poems it is sexuality which leads to God - and God which sanctifies that sexuality.

Browning plays, then, a more profound role in Clemo's thinking than any other writer, literary or theological. It was 'the idea of the personal covenant on the *Pauline* pattern [which] was always at the back of my mind' Clemo writes in *The Invading Gospel*, page 101. In Calvin, Spurgeon and Barth he found his own doctrine of election authoritatively confirmed: 'Your fate is unspeakably tragic, *but you need not fulfil it*', (*italics in original*).<sup>(1)</sup> But it was marriage rather than doctrine or re-entry into the church that was to confirm his salvation. As he writes in his reflective 'Poem at Sixty':

...For almost half a century  
I was so many selves in one skin  
That the entangled contending veins  
Would have snapped in early frost  
Had I not found a unifying trust,

It was to be his mother's controlling influence, a role later taken over by his wife, which enabled him to re-unify himself:

I found scope and motive in the far call  
Rising through mother's and wife's prayer, breaking despair,

In October 1984 Clemo moved with his wife to Weymouth. In a poem named in honour of that town Clemo was to find in his removal there a

<sup>1</sup>, *Gospel*, p.116.

symbol of his redemption from the tragic fate that had haunted him so long, a redemption made possible only by marriage:

Fate's dark dice drowns here, a bright ball is thrown,  
Caught, like my kingdom, from love alone.

Clemo's theological position may be considered now to be closer to that of Martin Buber than Calvin or Barth. Buber in his book *Between Man and Man* replaces the specifics of religion, with its dogmas and creeds, for the self-transcendence found when one relates to another as an I to a Thou, rather than an I to a You. Buber is quick to recognize that such a relationship may be thought 'the special realm of the erotic' (1) but insists upon the potential for such a *kenosis*, or emptying of the ego, in a genuine human encounter with anything: 'It can be', he says, 'an animal, a plant, a stone. No kind of appearance or event is fundamentally excluded'. (2) If Clemo were to go this far he would have to embrace not only a natural theology but a form of pantheism too. Rather, his position freezes Buber's at that first and most probable site for the disclosure of a Thou relationship, the erotic. That Clemo insists upon it as the site, and seemingly the only true site, for a full and real experience of grace would appear to take him closer to a Catholic understanding of the sacramental - and yet, this is the position, so far as sex goes, from which he started: sexual consummation as the one true sacrament. (To continue to try to define Clemo's theology along traditional lines becomes increasingly fruitless. This itself is indicative of the extent to which the poet has outgrown his earlier theological definitions.)

One poem perhaps better than any other, and more daringly than any other, expresses by itself the terms and the foundations of Clemo's private reworking of Christian theology, 'Virgin Harbour'. Clemo had demonstrated an impatience with the limitations of Protestantism as early as the *Frontier Signals* section of *The Map of Clay* by choosing to write poems about Catholic women saints: that some of those were critical is not ignored

1. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, London, 1961, p.21. 2. *ibid.*, p27.



here. With 'Virgin Harbour' he seems to be moving towards an acceptance of Mariology, although, as the previous paragraph has said, such categorizations of Christian schism seem to no longer be relevant in a discussion of Clemo's work. And in a sense, it is not so surprising that Clemo should have written a poem such as this. Each stage of his development has been at least partially, and one could argue primarily, the result of feminine contact. His constant drive has been for marriage and (within the terms of Christian marriage as Clemo understands them - an understanding which does not recognize all marriages blessed by Christian ceremony) sexual fulfilment. It had been his sense that 'the Christian definition of "love" is alarmingly different from the natural one' (1) that had led him to seek an independent formulation. Protestantism, as John Macquarrie has acknowledged presents a 'too masculine conception of God', in counterweight to which 'reverence for the Virgin satisfies a psychological need'. (2) But 'Virgin Harbour' is more than this. And the proximity to Mariology seems, at the poem's beginning, to cause the poet to question his position:

How deeply, under Calvin's shadow,  
Dare I name you - I with no waxen flares,  
I the heretic?

But the enthusiasm of his answer suggests such diffidence is gestural, a nod to the past:

...I go all the way  
With Gabriel, up the rocking stairs,  
And breathe my 'Hail Mary' over the miraculous harbour.

But it is the second and third stanzas that make this poem so important. Stanza two begins with reference to Mary's adolescent sexuality: the

1. *Gospel*, p.11. 2. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, London, 1966, p.357.

'racial charge' as he puts it in a poem which addresses Mary directly that 'claimed your body'. But, in Mary's case, no sooner had this come upon her than 'God's terse rejoinder nested at its core': a reference here to *Luke 1:35*. With Mary's encounter with God in the sexual act, where spiritual and physical perfectly met, Clemo is able to identify through the experience of his own marriage. Different quantitatively he would surely grant these two cases are, different qualitatively, the poem says, they are not: Clemo too 'was spun into grace where those two worlds meet'.

Stanza three expands upon these two different yet comparable acts of love. Employing the euphemism 'harbour' for the vaginal tract, Clemo writes:

There, at your yielding harbour, for me too  
Eternity unloaded its veiled  
Explosive love...

and thus both explicitly sites grace within the sexual act and, simultaneously, provides Biblical precedent for an interpretation which, while in no way heretical, valorizes the sexual in a way that Christianity has hitherto failed to do.<sup>(1)</sup> The sexual act is both the means chosen by God to bestow grace upon Mary, and the means by which Christ, the embodiment of the divine in human form, came into the world. Clemo speaks of the Virgin Mary's 'Explosive love'. Such love, because it is greater than mere passion, can be understood as a 'fire'. This 'fire' burns away the human struggle to make sense out of the world and create a manageable God in its own image: 'man's reverent search, religious gain' - a point which brings us right back to Barth. Mariology and Protestant neo-orthodoxy...and yet Clemo has managed to fuse them brilliantly. Mary's 'towering nuptials' - which must represent the perfect example of Clemo's concept of 'spiritual biology' - are diminished in importance, Clemo argues, by liberal theologians, because (and here one thinks, perhaps, of

1. This Mariological tendency is something which is projected onto the poet's lover or wife, as when, in 'Cactus on Carmel' he desires the 'embrace/ Of the holy Queen, conceived without stain', see page 146.



the Rev Reed in (*The Shadowed Bed*) they prefer a world tidier and less passionate. Clemo relocates the sexual right at the genesis of Christianity, and thereby cleanses the sexual of what he perceives to be its terrible taint.(1)

While reference to Buber is interesting in terms of marking the movement of Clemo's thought in terms of recognised theological positions and their literature, more intriguing is the kinship with William Blake which increasingly asserts itself in Clemo's poetry. I do not refer here to the fact that Clemo has written a dramatic monologue in the voice of William Blake ('William Blake Notes a Demonstration', *The Echoing Tip*). That poem, which will be discussed in Chapter Thirteen, seeks to appropriate Blake to a spiritual-political position, which, while important though it is in Clemo's work, has been, to date, a minor aspect. It is with respect to the two poets' attitudes towards human sexuality that the kinship between them is evident. This chapter has established that, for Clemo, there are two forms of human sexuality. The first, the natural, or pagan, is an animal act invested, at best, with the mark of human passion. The second form of human sexuality provides, as 'Virgin Harbour' says, the prospect of 'grace' exactly where the purely animal and the potentially spiritual meet - in the human act of 'love'. For Clemo, while outwardly indistinguishable, these two acts are utterly different kinds of activity, not different in degree, but different in their essential natures. This is not so in Blake's case, according to Beer. His book, *Blake's Humanism*, quotes from *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers* in order to illustrate that Blake refused to distinguish between the two. Beer notes the following imaginary conversation between Blake and Milton:

'...I saw Milton in imagination and he told me to beware of  
being misled by his *Paradise Lost*, In

particular, he wished me to show the falsehood of his doctrine that the pleasures of sex arose from the Fall. The Fall could not produce any pleasure.'(1)

'Carnal enjoyment' may be a corruption of that pristine pleasure but its derivation is the same. Blake's point, as Beer makes clear, is that if sexuality is pleasurable its pleasure must derive from before the Fall. And if this is so then, under the right conditions, sexuality offers a way back into that primal state of perfect pleasure under the gaze of God. Human sexuality occupies an important place, therefore, in Blake's visionary hierarchy. It is equal in its value to the activities of the 'creative artist' who '...purely by exercising his energies, enters this state, which is...called Generation.'(2) Such uncontrolled energy, whether the energy of an artist or the passion of a lover, stands, however, under the symbol of the destructive sun in Blake's mythology, a clear warning of the dangers of self-absorption. Superior to this 'twofold vision' is the 'state of Light' or threefold vision. In explanation of this part of Blake's scheme Beer writes:

The state of 'Light' (paradise) often called by Blake Beulah (from Isaiah, where the word is translated 'married' and from Bunyan, where it is the country from which the pilgrims can see the city to which they are travelling), Blake sees this state as one in which the first two ('Heaven' and 'Hell') are 'married'. It also expresses his idea that sexual love can give a brief revelation of that eternal light which belongs to the state of full vision.(3)

And it is precisely here, with Blake's concept of a 'state of Light' or threefold vision, superior to the truths the artist can produce, and attainable only through a certain kind of adult sexual relationship, that we discover the relationship between these two very different poets and

1, John Beer, *Blake's Humanism*, Manchester, 1968, p.31. 2, *ibid*, p.33. 3, *ibid*, p.33.



visionaries. For both, sexual love, under the right conditions, was a means of transcending the fallenness of human existence and gaining an insight or experience of the wholeness of a *humanness* lost at the Fall.

CHAPTER ELEVEN  
WAYFARERS AND FELLOW-TRAVELLERS

Since the mid-sixties the related genres of portraiture and dramatic monologue have occupied equal place with Clemo's poetry of landscape. In some poems landscape and portraiture combine. This happens, for example, in 'Helpston'; a type of poetry Clemo had already experimented with during the years 1948-1951. The 'new' genres are, with very few exceptions like 'Mr Barrett in Cornwall', concerned only with religious and artistic people. Their lives are explored and interpreted with the intention of providing documentary proof of the truths Clemo has discovered in his own life: namely, that only (a special kind of) marriage brings one to full spiritual truth, and that, without this anchor, spiritual and artistic creativity can become a dangerous delusion. There are rare exceptions to this. 'Mould of Castile' (*The Echoing Tip*) is a celebration of the life and faith of St Teresa. Written after 'Carmel', which is dedicated to St Therese of Lisieux, it is free of the latter's insistence that those who seek marriage necessarily yearn 'deepest/ For the ultimate Carmel of the soul'. 'Gladys Aylward', and 'La Salette' appraise their subjects without regard to Clemo's central ideological concerns. 'Francis Thompson' affectionately repays a debt to the poet who shaped Clemo's mature style. 'Eric Gill' and 'Wart and Pearl (to Gerard Manley Hopkins)' are more orientated to Clemo's insistence that art serve a higher purpose than itself, a point we shall see reappearing in several other poems. To Hopkins he writes:

Your Muse was Jesuit-maimed, but worse maimed  
You would have foundered, adrift Wilde's way,  
Swinburne's, Arnold's - shades that fell  
Akin to your nature's, on the Cherwell.



'Eric Gill', even more forcibly, repeats the claim made in 1961, in *Unicorn*, that unless poetry (and Clemo would surely extend this to all the arts) is 'redemptive rather than creative, it is just part of the general futility of civilized life' (1):

Gill's discipline showed the only way  
Of feeding and seeding the artist's throb  
On the safe home's hearth, Outside this rule all's torment  
Because all's ego,...

Gill, according to Clemo, worked free of the ego, the natural will of man; contemptuous of aesthetic philosophies and psychologies:

His hand carved stone and cuffed Art,  
So he worked with a clear conscience,  
Serving the absolute Beauty, Augustine's vision,  
Which breeds the polemic and the convert,  
.....With quiet joy  
He chiselled the ritual image,

But while 'Eric Gill' makes no mention of them there are two important aspects of Gill's life likely to endear him to Clemo. The first is the fact that Gill married and lived, by all accounts then available, a very happy married life: the second is Gill's attitude towards sex, which combined an openness towards the erotic with a firm public insistence on fidelity within marriage and chastity without it. The biography behind this poem, in other words, supports Clemo's two central theses.

Clemon concentrates upon artistic and religious figures not because their lives are generally available to the public, for some of Clemo's subjects are obscure, but because Clemo believes that both types live

1. *Unicorn*, op.cit.

beyond the bounds of ordinary experience. This is not to imply Clemo finds uncreative lives necessarily inferior. The poem 'Charlotte Nicholls', already discussed, disproves this. Rather, is his attitude towards the artistic and religious comparable with Wittgenstein's attitude towards the philosopher. According to David Pears, Wittgenstein believed the philosopher was bound to overstep the boundaries of language. To do so was necessary if only in order to be retrieved and thus discover that the philosophical 'depth' is in fact only on the 'surface' of ordinary language. (1)

The artist, according to Clemo, is likely to find himself 'in conflict with everything that would make the world safe and tidy'. (2) This push against the boundaries of ordinary perception offers the prospect of an 'especially privileged insight'. (3) But if pursued for 'mere self-expression' it will produce 'an especially perverted insight'. (4) Religion is held, almost always, to be superior to art, bringing 'a grace.../ Deeper than art probes' ('John Wesley'), although rarely, as in 'Caradoc Evans', Clemo is prepared to favour an artist's vision. Religion can come in for criticism, as in 'Carmel'. In 'On the Death of Karl Barth' we see Barth's revelatory truth cast aside by the theological fashions of the twentieth century. Religion, Clemo is at pains to point out, can also serve the ego:

Truth predicts the eclipse of truth,  
And in that eclipse it condemns man,  
Whose self-love with its useful schools of thought,  
Its pious camouflage of a God within,  
Is always the cause of the shadow, the fall, the burial,  
The smug rub of hands  
Amid a reek of research,

1, David Pears, *Wittgenstein*, London, 1971, p.114. 2. *Gospel*, p.14.

3. *ibid.*, p.15. 4. *ibid.*



The sardonic '*useful* schools of thought' recalls Clemo's life-long antipathy towards 'social' gospels, and the dilution of faith to an ultimate concern (Tillich), or a moral commitment (Van Buren). But the possibility that the phrase, 'a God within', may extend to well established churches is made more credible by the poem 'Cookworthy at Carloggas', a portrait of the Quaker entrepreneur who discovered the china clay deposits of St Austell. Having discovered Cornwall's mineral richness Cookworthy was, according to Clemo, determined that:

...the graven sickness  
Deep in the stone's heart must be set raving  
In a rabble of cones, kilns, tool-scraped ribs;  
Countryside reshaped, sand fanned  
Wide over the wild heath, for man's advancement,

Cookworthy, ruminating over his mineral discovery, is conscious of its possible material benefits, 'the potter's joy, the relief of the poor'. One only has to turn to Clemo's 'The Frosted Image' to realise his scepticism concerning material benefits. (The same point is made repeatedly in *The Invading Gospel*). Cookworthy's 'Vague foreshadowings' of future weal do receive spiritual blessing in Clemo's poem. But not through the spiritual validity of the Quaker's faith. Rather, this blessing comes through the proximity of:

...St Stephen's church tower,  
Dour and massive, brooding within a stone's throw...

Also implicated in 'On the Death of Karl Barth' is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the authors of the 'suffocating swirl of heresy' which Clemo argues in the Barth poem was responsible for the ills of our age. The poem 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer' is disturbingly unsympathetic towards its subject. Bonhoeffer was both a Protestant and a theologian whose work is generally

considered to be amongst the most important written this century.(1) He joined a group which sought to assassinate Hitler, and following his arrest was executed in a concentration camp. Before his removal to Flossenbug, Dietrich wrote a series of letters in which he outlined a radical new theology, central to which was the idea that God had died on the cross in order that man might 'come of age'.(2) It is this that provokes the hostility the poem displays towards its subject. Bonhoeffer's theology is equated with the Nazi terror.

Buchenwald of ill fame (faded  
After thirty years post-Nazi smile, the shame  
Of man's coming of age),...

Clemons had implicated Liberal Theology in the rise of Nazism (a political doctrine it should be remembered which Clemons, albeit briefly, supported) in *The Invading Gospel*, without naming Bonhoeffer.(3) Now the latter's theology is seen to produce a weakened, damaged, image of God - 'The true cross turned crooked under pressure' - which lacks the means by which its followers may rise above the depths of human depravity:

...The captive pastor  
Saw only a Cross that meant mere crumpled deity,  
A heaven that knew only secular service  
From the adult nature's autonomy,

The poem closes on a kinder note. As Bonhoeffer makes his 'final journey', the 'last plank' is said to have been set 'straight again'. Whether Clemons seeks to suggest that Bonhoeffer at the end of his life returned to a more orthodox position is not clear. Whatever the reason:

1. See, for example, William Nicholls' assessment of him in *Systematic and Philosophical Theology*, Harmondsworth, 1969, p.192. 2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer; *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, London, 1971; see, pp.326-329. 3. *Gospel*, pp.54-56.



...An infinite mercy,  
Moving above death-cell and execution yard,  
Annulled for him the blind probe  
And the secular tolling,

If Clemo's treatment of Bonhoeffer lacks compassion until its subject's death, 'Simone Weil' displays no charity at all. The poem opens in 1941 in the Ardeche where Simone Weil, through the kind offices of her friend Father Perrin, had found employment on the farm of Gustave Thibon as a consequence of Simone's desire to understand the life of the French peasant. In Clemo's dramatic description she arrived:

In the second autumn of the swastika's  
Jagged dance of blood on French soil,

The peasants' own defiance of the occupying enemy is conveyed through their appropriation of the names Jesus and Mary as 'passwords'.

Simone Weil is depicted amongst the toiling, anonymous and defiant figures as an 'intruder', 'Sibylline and sinister'. So far the poem contains nothing objectionable. Weil was to all she met an enigma. It is when, immediately following on from the above and as part of the same sentence, Clemo describes her as 'Tragic as a strutting Nazi' that the reader's sensibility suffers assault. To describe her as tragic is entirely apt, but to link the suffering and tragedy of her life with the Nazi programme - which is what Clemo seems to be doing here - on the implicit argument that both enterprises were against orthodox Christian thinking is to make a blunder of association of the worst kind.

The above is not a momentary aberration on Clemo's part. Weil's activities in the Spanish Civil War are inaccurately reported (she did not, as Clemo asserts, take up arms), her asceticism is referred to out of the context necessary to make it intelligible and Clemo's account of her acceptance of prayer is a crude and cruel caricature. (1)

1. For a brief summary of Weil's life and ideas see E.W.Tomlin, *Simone Weil*, Cambridge, 1954.

The reason for all this would seem to be Weil's acceptance of divine revelation *outside* the Christian faith as well as inside it. Clemo reads this as heresy. Weil was, he says:

Too proud to take Abraham's root  
As a pledge of a redemptive whole,  
Her spurious breadth sucks at a pagan thorn,  
Slighting the Hebrew Virgin, the elect fruit  
Earth-sweet at Cana when the bride was kissed,

But the charge of heresy does not entirely explain Clemo's attitude towards Weil. Others, Thomas Hardy, Caradoc Evans, Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf and, of course, Lawrence are treated more kindly. Weil, more so than Bonhoeffer, receives the full force of Clemo's condemnation. This may be the result of inadequate revision of the poem. Or the evident lack of sensitivity on Clemo's part in this poem may be merely an aberration. The third possibility is that 'Simone Weil' is the way it is *because* of Clemo's views on creativity, spirituality and marriage. Gill converted to Catholicism as a married man. Hopkins' acceptance into the Jesuit order imposed celibacy upon him, which as we have noted, Clemo considers left Hopkins 'maimed'. Bonhoeffer had intended to marry before events overtook him, and Clemo makes reference to this in his poem, where Bonhoeffer remembers 'the girl he would never wed'. Weil stubbornly remained outside the Church, despite her great love of Catholicism, seeking a new spiritual insight which would unite Christianity with the great pagan religions. And she was, without the imposition of religious vows, celibate all her life. It is consistent with what we know of Clemo's ideas that to be a heretic and a celibate is to be doubly damned.

Such an interpretation does receive support from a study of the bulk of Clemo's portraits and monologues. Artistic figures tend to be treated sympathetically regardless of their religious positions, more so if biographical material indicates a love relationship: religion, which Clemo considers almost always superior as a route to truth, is judged with less leniency because of its greater importance. Its errors are too



serious to allow for too much individual interpretation.

'Mary Shelley in Geneva' provides an interesting insight into the forces which shape Clemo's sympathies. Its subject speaks at a moment of profound disillusionment. As she reflects back upon the lives of her husband and their friends she concludes:

But all has ripened, burst, and I come back  
To a sour epilogue of bold ideals,

The ideals by which she had lived seem to be 'mocking' her, and she holds to them now only half-heartedly:

I would loathe religion as my parents did,  
As Shelley did, but I am tired, unsure,  
I feel we missed some clue, got blinded, trapped...

She ponders on the cause of this and speculates in the following way:

Suppose my father, once in Calvin's fold,  
Had broadened the firm core with tenderness  
And won my mother to it, brought me up  
Believing heaven had chosen me for joy,  
High thought and poetry and wedded hearts  
Finding a balance in the Christian grace?...

This is not just empty speculation she realizes but something of a betrayal of the principles by which she has lived. 'Calvin', she concludes, 'was monstrous', and she must remain loyal to the memory of her husband. Possibly it is Mary's loyalty towards her husband and his principles - she never remarried nor recanted her atheistic humanism - that endears her to Clemo. But much of her attraction as a poetic subject surely lies in the fact her father, William Godwin, had been raised as a Calvinist. It is his rejection of faith that is seen as the source of her unhappiness. This

possibility forms the centre of the poem's poignancy.

'Virginia Woolf Remembers St Ives' appears similarly motivated. It is not Woolf's literary achievement, not specific events within her life, for none are mentioned, that causes Clemo to make her a speaker in a dramatic monologue. Rather, it is the fact that her 'father had worn a dog-collar'. Clemo recognizes in Woolf's novels what he calls a search for 'solid truth', but sees this as misdirected. She should and could have found such a truth, the poem intimates, had her father been surer in his faith and more able to communicate it to her. 'He reared me' Clemo has Woolf say, 'in silent guilt', as a consequence of which she 'choked early' on spiritual matters and 'shall die choking' (here Clemo switches from the colloquial meaning of 'choke' to its normative use) for the lack of it.

Two poems specifically deal with figures who were forced to make a decision between art and religion. They are 'A Choice About Art' and 'Eilidh Boadella' (both published in *A Different Drummer*). The former poem compares the lives and achievements of Vincent Van Gogh and Oswald Chambers. Both men were artistically gifted and religiously inclined. But whereas Van Gogh abandoned religion in favour of a life dedicated to painting, Chambers made the opposite decision. It matters not to Clemo that Van Gogh has achieved an enduring fame and respect in the world of art while Chambers is scarcely known at all. One would not expect Clemo to weigh human achievement by such a scale. By Clemo's valuation Van Gogh has left 'some savage pictures'. Chambers, in contrast, the poem's footnote informs us, has had the notes to his Egyptian sermons published.<sup>(1)</sup> But Clemo is not arguing here so crudely for the superiority of religious works over secular ones. It is not man's remains by which Clemo measures the rightness of their decision, but the life itself. Van Gogh's total dedication to painting is described as the 'Loll of self-indulgence'. A dedication to the ego which was almost bound to end, as all egoism will, according to Clemo, in self-destruction. Chambers, by contrast, married and lived happily and set such an example of married life to the British troops stationed at Zeitoun, where he was chaplain, that the men were 'awed

1, In point of fact, Chambers has some dozen titles to his credit.



by the balm/ Of ...[his]... fertile marriage'.

One notes, yet again, that it is Christian marriage, as Clemo understands it - an understanding that excludes most of those whose marriages have been solemnized in church - - rather than the Christianity itself which carries the burden of positive value here.

'Eilidh Boadella' does not valorize marriage as does 'A Choice About Art', for its subject died at a tragically young age. But the poem re-enacts the decision Van Gogh made. Like the Dutch painter, Boadella burnt with a desire to do something for the poor. Her talents were literary rather than plastic, but the significance is the same. Her choice, like Oswald's, was for a life sacrificed to Christian duty. Clemo puts into Boadella's mouth an almost identical denunciation he gave to Charlotte Nicholls:

How can these self-fulfilling  
Poets live with their conscience?

Boadella's choice is to 'answer the wider homecall'.

Where art can be seen to have been sacrificed to religion, as in 'Eilidh Boadella', Clemo is inclined to see only a life triumphant, regardless the life was tragic and abrupt: where religion is seen as sacrificed to art, as in van Gogh's case, it is the disillusion, the despair evident in the biographical material that Clemo seizes upon as proof of his view of art outside the discipline of Christianity. Holman Hunt's life, in the poem which bears his name, is seen as inevitably besmirched by a moral collapse consequent upon the privileging of art.:

...Millais and I  
Were the least corrupted, I suppose,

Holman Hunt reflects: 'But there were murky patches':

...my religious mission's  
Dubious with daubs that wrung tears from Fanny  
And sting Edith's pride now at my life's close,

The only consolation Clemo allows Hunt is the preservation of his fame.

When religion (particularly Protestant versions of it) is seen as an innovative force in a subject, and this is combined with marriage, Clemo's poetry is sensitive, complex, subtle and very supportive of the subject, even when, as in the case of 'John Wesley', the marriage was disastrous. Perhaps Clemo would find in Wesley's marriage to a woman who 'was no more than conventionally religious' (1) a version of his own mother's mistake. Perhaps in Wesley Clemo identified a man as passionate and as fearful of that passion as himself. It is worth noting with regard to this point the final lines of this poem:

...The baptism  
Of lovers' tears at Stanton,  
Savannah, Leeds, lit and softened  
His hymn of crucifixion,

The pattern, once identified, is very clear. 'After Billy Bray' and 'Alfred Wallis' (both in *The Echoing Tip*) are joyful works and lend a sense of triumph to their subjects. The former lauds a local evangelical lay preacher, while the latter expounds what Clemo sees as a Christian Fundamentalist theory of art, and implies a tradition within this which Clemo has continued on after Wallis's death. Clemo has also sought out figures which combine Christian vigour and a sexual relationship. In the cases of 'Henry Martyn', and 'Jim Elliot', the subjects' deaths before they could marry their betrothed lends added poignancy. Where faith, marriage and creativity are combined, as in 'Toyohiko Kagawa', Clemo finds complete confirmation of the truth such poems seek to espouse.

1, Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley*, London, 1979, p.217.



Christian marriage is certainly the most important ingredient in the recipe, and when Clemo makes it the focus of a poem every line seems illuminated with a special joy. This is evident not only where Clemo deliberately moves into eulogy, as here in 'Francis Barclay':

There was no false step in her quest;  
It was scarcely a quest, but rather a joyous racing  
To embrace the visible mercies, multiplied  
Till the music soared and charged...

But also where he outlines his subject's biography:

Her honeymoon burned amid Christ's palms;  
Her parson-husband knew his Palestine,  
And knew his bride and she conceived  
In the holy East and bore a child at nineteen,  
Through forty years of sunshine  
She was creative in the exempt ideal;  
She never gave a kiss that staled,  
And never sowed a book in the grudging desert,  
( 'Francis Barclay' )

The same sweet-tenderness envelops 'Charlotte Bronte', 'Genevan Towers', 'Katherine Luther', 'The Brownings at Vallombrosa'.

If there is a fault with some of these poems it is, perhaps, that hagiography threatens to replace biography. I suspect it is an accusation Clemo would willingly plead guilty to. He has argued consistently that art should serve to instruct and inspire, rather than entertain, or slake an aesthetic appetite. But such an accusation is serious when the poems seek to provide, as these do, not merely one person's version of several other peoples' lives, but evidence, proof, of truths that appertain to all our lives. And yet it is seldom that Clemo's poems can be said to suffer the faults of hagiography. Affection towards his subjects is not a crime in a

poet, so long as it does not lead to deliberate falsification or sentimentalisation. Clemo, as we have seen in 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer' and 'Simone Weil', is perhaps more tempted towards distortion with those towards whom he registers strong disagreement: and these are only two amongst two score well-researched and well balanced poems. At his best, and particularly in the dramatic monologues where he sometimes manages completely to convince us of the very presence and tone of voice of the speaker, Clemo is content to let biographical detail make his case. This is certainly true of 'Katherine Luther' and 'Geneva Towers'. If both poems are nonetheless infused with a sense of grace, Clemo cannot be held accused of a lack of objectivity. Clemo animates: he does not fabricate. It is significant, with regard to the theme this chapter has been concerned to elucidate, that poems such as 'Katherine Luther' and 'Genevan Towers' are as much concerned with the human relationship of husband and wife as they are with the divine relationship of Creator and creature.

The strengths of 'Katherine Luther' and 'Genevan Towers' may, in part as well, be due to the gender of their subjects. While it is not a point that can be quantified, (1) it is nonetheless striking that far more of Clemo's portraits and monologues which take a feminine subject, as opposed to a masculine subject, read as subtle, complex and convincing representations. And this seems to be so, with the exception of 'Simone Weil', even when biography does not dispose Clemo kindly towards his subject. It is certainly true of 'Charlotte Mew'. The poetess who penned the lines:

I do not envy Him His victories, His arms are full of broken things,

('Madeleine in Church')(2)

1, One can, however, quantify the number of each genre in relation to the gender of its subject. A count shows that while Clemo has written only nine portrait poems with feminine subjects compared with fourteen with male subjects, the proportions with regard to dramatic monologues are slightly more than reversed with six male-voiced poems to ten female-voiced poems, (These figures are based on *Cactus on Carmel to A Different Drummer* inclusive.) 2, *Collected Poems of Charlotte Mew*, London, 1953



whose life was dedicated to the literary circle of London and who, at best, had a fascination for 'the *idea* of Christ and the Cross' (my italics), (1) while eschewing any formal religious adherence, who refused to marry and was probably lesbian, suffered disabling bouts of depression and who took her own life by poison, is not a subject who would seem to offer Clemo anything more than further evidence of the calamity that befalls those who place art before religion. And yet, 'Charlotte Mew' is a remarkable and engaging poem, from its opening bitter pun:

We tragic Mews - the Muse could only smirk  
Like a cracked angel,...

to its bitter-sweet conclusion as Charlotte downs the bottle of disinfectant with which she ended her life.

The life - a struggle 'for breathing space among the normal' - is rendered honestly and powerfully: with Charlotte's many obsessions and quirks, her parrot Willie, the haunting nightmare that her sister had been buried alive - which was finally responsible for her mental breakdown, running through the poem as it did through Charlotte's mind in her last sad years. And Charlotte's poetry is there, strewn like tattered threads of thought across the monologue. (2) Clemo allows space for the poetess's vain struggle with Christ, and its failure: 'the marvel snapped:/ I was too small to hold it'. All this shows beyond a sympathy, an intimate knowledge of biographical detail, and acquaintance with Mews' poetry. The life is, as it were, allowed to speak for itself, needs no commentary; although her struggle with the doctors who sought to save her, for those familiar with the details of Charlotte Mew's biography, is at ironic odds with the determination for a clean finish Clemo has his poetic subject speak. And speak she does, for Clemo has managed to appropriate the distinctive, direct, almost abrupt voice characteristic of Charlotte Mew's verses, so that we hear her words - as it were - through her voice.

1, Alida Monro, 'A Memoir', in *Collected Poems of Charlotte Mew*, op.,cit.

2, Some half dozen of Charlotte Mews poems are alluded to, paraphrased or quoted from,

As remarkable in a quite different way is 'Katherine Luther'. Lacking the wealth of biographical detail, published papers, etc. available to him when writing 'Charlotte Mew', 'Katherine Luther' is nonetheless an evocative poem which brings its shadowy subject to life with tenderness and complete conviction. The poem opens with Katherine gazing out at evening across the rooftops of Wittenberg. The scene and her mood meld:

It will be an enchanted night  
Heralding your fiftieth birthday, Martin,  
The stars swarm thick and blue in the dry air  
As the autumn evening softens Wittenberg.

She regrets her absence from his life during its famous and more dramatic moments, and links these, in her mind, with the harshness of her husband's childhood when 'Life meant slash and fire/ And wolves' teeth...' All these 'thuds and thunders', as Katherine half-mockingly calls his achievements, are in the past, part of the theological revolution he started and which lead to his, reluctant, marriage:

You only sought my hand  
Because Melancthon urged you...

and:

...You even tried  
To fix a marriage between me and Glantz!

Katherine storms in feigned outrage, for she knows that, as she says, the basis of a marriage is of no account where 'love grew personal'. Now, he is an attentive husband, serenading her with hymns and carols, and initiating, through their marriage, as she guesses, 'a new order of sainthood'. (Another example, perhaps, of Clemo's borrowing from Catholicism.) 'Katherine Luther' closes on the same poignant note to be



found in the final lines of 'Genevan Towers' - a double portrait of Jean and Idelette Calvin. But these moments of presentiment of death only serve to increase the tenderness of the marriages portrayed. The bitter-sweetness is calculated and carefully measured out in each case, there to balance, through the warmth and softness of the contribution made by the wives, the harshness of their husbands' creeds. As Clemo notes in 'Genevan Towers':

In the same year that Calvin wed  
A strong stone bridge began to reach out  
Over the Rhine, to replace the wooden one,  
Linking St Gervais with Geneva city...

This bridge becomes within the poem a symbol of the solidity, but also, coldness, of Calvin's theology. His marriage, therefore, and his subsequent loss of Idelette, serve as proof of the need for a feminine aspect to Protestant dogma. (1):

She sighs at the window, aware  
.....  
...that the man she loves  
Will be obscured to future ages  
Because he built with cold offensive stone,  
Scarring men's pride, and because he burnt rotten bridges -  
And because her soft towers, (2) warming his manhood, stayed  
(As she guesses) hardly a decade.

Poems such as these are no more hagiography than 'Charlotte Mew' or 'Mary Shelley in Geneva' can be considered propaganda. They are, what their author intended - portraits and dramatizations of lives which are their own best, or worst, epitaph upon the values by which their subjects lived.

1, One is reminded here of Macquarrie's remark concerning the Virgin Mary; see present paper, Chapter Ten, p.160. 2, This image, of feminine sexuality as 'towers', was used also in 'Virgin Harbour'.

CHAPTER TWELVE  
THE MAP REDRAWN

*Broad Autumn's* title poem declares:

I have not changed my country;  
I have grown and explored  
In my faith's undivided world,

It is a curious claim to make at the start of a collection which contains 'Bedruthan', 'Tregargus', 'Wessex and Lyonesse', 'St Gildas', 'A Clash at Ikpe', 'Affirmative Way' and 'Royal Wedding'; for each of these poems questions the validity of 'Broad Autumn's' proud boast. 'Royal Wedding' affirms a tradition Clemo had long ago denounced as spiritually bankrupt; 'A Clash at Ikpe', 'St Gildas' and 'Wessex and Lyonesse' locate spiritual truths in landscapes beyond Clemo's clayworks; 'Bedruthan' takes Clemo into the Cornwall the holiday-maker knows; while 'Affirmative Way' and 'Tregargus' re-evaluate the clayland as a suitable metaphor for Clemo's understanding of his vision.

A similar apparent contradiction occurred in *The Echoing Tip* four years earlier. One of the poems collected there, 'In Contrast', delicately evokes 'bride-white hawthorn sprays, / Ferns, whortleberries' and wagtails. And yet within a few pages he asserts:

Not through me can nature express her sadness;  
I have no buried joys, so my art's  
Never a voice for the unassuaged departure,  
For the earth's pang which autumn wind asserts  
When drained leaves drop and drift...

('A Couple at Fowey')



When, less than ten years after writing 'Broad Autumn', Clemo took up permanent residence in Weymouth he seemed thereby to deny the poem's claim as forcibly as possible. And yet, there is no contradiction. The fauna spoken of so lovingly in 'In Contrast' are prefaced by important qualifiers:

The feet that now pause with mine  
.....  
The hand which at last lays mine

These two lines empty the gentle landscape of any symbolic-redemptive value the reader may seek to find in it. It is not the plants and the birds of the poem which carry its meaning but the human presence of Clemo's wife. It is the human significance within 'A Clash at Ikpe' that enables Clemo to find in a tribal rebellion against the missionary station of Mary Slessor a parallel to 'the West's' refusal to hear the word of God. Similarly, it is Clemo's admiration of Alexis Carrel and T. F. Powys which takes him, in imagination, to Brittany and Dorset respectively. Clemo has still not written a single poem that can be placed with the tradition of 'Nature' poems renounced so forcibly in 'Neutral Ground' and 'Sufficiency'.

And yet, individually considered, a few poems written since marriage do suggest a recantation of the clayscape of the kind previously, if prematurely, proclaimed in *Frontier Signals*. 'Crab Country' in *Cactus on Carmel* is such a poem, and has much in common with the earlier poem 'Goonvean Claywork Farm.' Its first two stanzas recall the poetry of *The Clay Verge*, in a military metaphor of advancement: 'Pincer movement on the hills'. But, with stanza three, Clemo introduces the device which necessitates revaluation of such industrial vandalism:

The road to the chapel has been seized  
In the new expansion,

It is significant that Clemo refers to the destruction of the chapel before mentioning nesting birds and spring hedgerows. By doing so he positions

natural beauty under faith affirming the greater importance of the latter. (The destruction of beauty is still not, for a writer like Clemo, necessarily a cause for sorrow, as 'A Couple at Fowey' makes clear.) In stanza four of 'Crab Country' Clemo writes: 'What maimed the bloom has blocked the chapel road.' And while nature takes first place syntagmatically here, the clause is quite clearly end-weighted. The 'clay-crabs' tactics' have not only damaged the poet's response to natural beauty, they have, more importantly, made his entry into the community of faith more difficult. But, if Clemo can no longer offer 'praise/ For the claw-beaten flower', it is in part because of the 'deeper unity' has found in marriage. The line in which Clemo speaks of being, now, 'exempt' from 'probe of the pincer and crush of the shell', unambiguously associates his native landscape with the harrowing he experienced before faith was fulfilled in marriage. His native landscape, the poem suggests, is an outdated metaphor.

These ideas are explored again and with greater subtlety in 'Clay-Dams', *The Echoing Tip*. Here, rather than planned industrial advance, it is a winter 'clay-dam burst' that has wreaked havoc upon the adjacent countryside. Consciously asserting continuity with his earlier self, 'I had never been a "meadow, grove and/ Stream" poet', it seems at first that this poem will employ the same qualificatory device 'Crab Country' had: 'the dam-burst deluge was immoderate'. But 'Clay-Dams' marks a significant advance in Clemo's use of his old terrain. He exploits the impure condition of this voided waste as metaphor:

Half-cleansed yet at the mud stage,  
 That clay would be purged no further;  
 It could not pass to controlled heat  
 Under skilled hands, but could only lie  
 Wasted and rotting, a sun-soured blister,  
 Below the Bethel where my half-cleansed clay  
 Had been vowed to a higher pattern,

The 'half-cleansed' clay is made to serve here as a symbol of Clemo's own



condition prior to marriage, after which 'skilled hands' tempered his wayward spirit. (He goes on, in the final stanza, to speak of the 'soft heavings' as 'dammed and controlled' by a 'wall of faith') It seems reasonable here to interpret 'skilled hands' as a metonym for the poet's wife, and, therefore as one more allusion to the concept of liberation from the sentence of his blood-line through marriage, rather than to understand 'skilled hands' metaphorically, as divine guidance. The latter would not necessarily constitute a misreading, but such a reading should recognise divine guidance in the act of marriage.

In this poem, 'clay' is given a poetic productivity equal to that of the best of his post-war poetry. It symbolizes his unregenerate youthful self, as well as the mature adult's sexual passion which, in the marriage bed, finds 'a heat/ Subtler than sun or switched current'. 'Clay Dams' is an excellent example of 'Broad Autumn's claim that 'True faith matures without discarding'. For Clemo is determined in this poem to return to and re-exploit the St Austell landscape in a new way, but once again entirely within the framework of the actual material conditions that exist there, just as he had in *The Map of Clay*. The same is true of 'Helpston'. In this poem Clemo, as he had earlier in 'The Two Beds', argues the influence of geography as he traces the differences between himself and the poet John Clare. Clare's rural, fen-threatened Northamptonshire, becomes the very symbol of the poetic, and thus an image of what Clemo himself might have been:

I never heard wild geese  
Nor sowed wild oats, but the omen  
Was there, like Clare's, straggling from the fen,

The poet, Clemo says, 'Seems born marsh-magnetised/ In some Helpston, between bog and limestone'. 'Bog' here would appear to stand as an image similar to Bunyan's 'Slough of Despond' in *The Pilgrim's Progress*: 'limestone' for the hard uncompromising creed of Christian faith.

Clare's rural world was built upon the fens 'by skilled drainage', converted from slime by purely human endeavour. All its agricultural

productivity, and the beauty that arose from this, lay under a terrible illusion, as do all human attempts to rise above the condition of original sin. The countryside's beauty may have 'Looked clear of slime', so that Clare could dream among 'cowslip and pilewort' and build his vision of love on purely human terms. But such dreams, like the land on which he dreamt them, never ascended higher, for all his hopes, than the level of the stinking bog. Consequently Clare's 'Helpston' - the name here is used as at the opening of the poem, as an imaginative place of vision each poet possesses - unlike Clemo's, 'which choice of limestone saved':

Dropped to the softening water  
Till High Beech madhouse hid the crater,

'The Rift' (*Broad Autumn*) sees Clemo return to an earlier symbolic pairing, that of clay and sea (used for the first time in 'Alien Grain', *Frontier Signals*). Recalling his terrible struggles amid the clayland's in which he encountered his 'warring clay-God', the poet concludes the first stanza:

All my youth was spent  
Fighting there, with no chance to sift  
Or study, develop the thinker's gift, (1)

But 'Then a ground-mist from the watching sea/ Sucked at the raided mine-cap' and 'Faith and desire' were granted a broader, saner perspective - 'the broad heaven's sign...the far sea's tap'. The imagery of sea used here may also allude to Ruth Peaty's residence in Weymouth.

In Chapter Ten Mary Douglas's theory of the use of natural symbols as expressive of social relations was introduced. It was shown there that Clemo's poetry of *The Map of Clay*, and particularly the poems in *The Clay Verge*, were in accordance with what Douglas's theory would predict of an individual who felt himself not only socially isolated but in danger of

1. This is at odds with his autobiographical prose, see *Confession* pp.132 and 184, but is in agreement with the dramatization of the clay quarries found in *The Map of Clay*.



contamination from the society surrounding him. Following that, one short example was given of imagery characteristic of the kind employed by Clemo subsequent to his marriage. We can now take up this second aspect of Douglas's theory and show that Clemo's later imagery does indeed fall within a more public, commonal and accessible set of social values.

If we examine the poems collected in *The Echoing Tip*, the first collection of poems produced entirely after his marriage, we find a new expansiveness of reference. The clayland is still used but not in terms of the inverted value system Clemo had used in *The Map of Clay*. The values given to the industrial scene and the natural landscape surrounding it are seen to fall within cultural norms. The industrial waste is employed as a symbol of pollution, while it is the countryside which now carries positive valuation. The fear of ingression, of being overwhelmed by forces the poet cannot control, is no longer evident. A study of Clemo's two later collections confirms this changed pattern of usage.

Clemon's appropriation of other Cornish localities, those which British society thinks of when it thinks of Cornwall, St Just-in-Roseland, Bedruthan, Fowey, shows a shifting to public domains of experience. Not only are these locations significant, Clemon's use of sand, sea, sun as positive symbols and symbols requiring no esoteric knowledge for their decoding, offer further evidence of his appropriation of the signs and meanings of the wider cultural milieu and, therefore, of his relocation of himself within, if not that milieu in its entirety, at least a recognised part of it. Perhaps most striking in this regard in *The Echoing Tip* is 'Torrey Canyon', with its elegiac tone of voice for the fish and gulls destroyed by an oil slick: 'Oh bright gulls smeared, sinking with grease-deadened screams,/ Unwinged in the crash-bred slough!'

The preceding chapter traced Clemon's pursuit of an argument through the lives of others. While his appropriation of biographical material to his own ends has not significantly changed, his use of that material has. His biographical subjects are not now assimilated into his cosmology of

cleanliness and defilement. They are allowed in the dramatic monologues to speak in their own voices.

Clemo's extension of landscape beyond Cornwall and Devon again speaks of the loss of his fear of contamination, of the sense of a special private place wherein lies safety. But, as was stated above, these poems are possible only because of the strong association of place with person. Clemo's integration into the dominant culture and value system of Great Britain is both heavily qualified and person-dependent, and his use of other landscapes expresses that dependency.

The poems discussed in detail so far affirm loyalty toward his native landscape and continuity, although certainly not identity, with the poetic values Clemo made of it. Others do not. Sometimes he associates his native landscape not with the pursuit of a radical Orthodoxy but more simply with the personal suffering he experienced there. In 'Wessex and Lyonesse' he speaks of 'pit-torture', while in 'Affirmative Way' Clemo finds in a quarry rim's collapse an image of his own loss of hearing and sight. Discovering this landslide the poet says:

I felt balked, deprived, as this road led  
To the ridge of downs, my favourite spot  
For mystic musings at twilight,

Linking landslide with infirmity Clemo remembers:

...the maxims of the negative school,  
The trite line of condolence;  
"The blind glimpse truths that sighted people miss;  
The deaf hear subtler tongues astir within..."

Contemptuously, the poet declares he will have 'None of that patter here!', only too aware of the loss he has suffered. And it is here, for the first time, that Clemo seems to suggest the long years of immersion in the clayscape have psychologically disabled him as much as deafness and



blindness have physically. He writes:

The soul's road to divine wisdom  
Passes so close to the sensuous quarry  
That a maiming of the fertile ledge -  
Loss of touch, sound, movement, colour,  
.....  
Tears half the road away,  
Leaving the rest unsafe,

With chilling honesty Clemo assesses the truths to which he had clung against the objective realisation that:

You cannot trust an intuition  
Flashed merely as a compensation,  
The insight, the forced dream,  
The theory, which a cripple shapes  
To train, sustain, explain himself,  
Falls sterile and untested...

Despite appearances to the contrary, Clemo is not about to deny the validity of his belief in elected marriage. That faith *has been tested* and, through his marriage to Ruth Peaty, vindicated. Further, as 'Affirmative Way' goes on to argue, the truths Clemo glimpsed were encountered before his infirmities made such self-deception possible. 'My creed', he confirms:

...was proved by keen sense-evidence -  
Tossed tint, girlhood's frown and smile...

There is, in other words, as the poem asserts, returning to its opening metaphors, an 'intact road' marking an undamaged pathway around the 'unmutilated edge' of the 'sensuous quarry'. The truths to which Clemo has

held came to him 'Before the frost came, before the quarry crust fell' and are therefore exempt from the poem's harsh judgment.

'Clay-Dams' and 'Affirmative Way' show Clemo working fully within the clayland imagery he has made his own. Both poems extend the possibilities of that landscape through subtle alterations of its signification. This process is taken one stage further in, amongst others, 'Tregargus', and 'Private Pompeii'. In both poems Clemo understands his life as divided into three phases: the first, associated with his juvenile poetry, was when he first experienced his idealized vision of love, and found its confirmation in the lives of Dante and Beatrice, and Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. These were the years of innocent enjoyment of the company of little girls; an enjoyment illuminated by 'faith'. The second phase coincides with the poetry of *The Map of Clay*, the onset of permanent blindness, and his romantic failures. The third phase is the present and marriage to Ruth; a marriage which, reaching over the years of desolation - the tormented visionary in the clay-pits - reunites the mature man with his original idealized vision.

In 'Tregargus' it is a stream which acts as metaphor for both the poet and the truth he is concerned with. Diverted by the industrial workings near the poet's home the stream ran crooked thereafter:

A stream was diverted so that the pitched grit,  
Clay-waste, could crawl and swell on the natural bed,  
But the crooked current still arrives and splashes  
With a pattering hum over the stubborn boulders...

Despite the actions of the 'clay-waste' (here an image of the poet's blood-line through the Clemos), the stream survives and re-emerges as a waterfall. At the poem's close we are returned to this stream, which scarcely needs the introduction of a rainbow to ensure it is read as an image of re-integration and fulfilment:



The waterfall's hum is mesmeric,  
Half-sad, yet matching the rainbow, the curve  
Of a song diverted, reaching us after the blast.

The later landscape poetry, that is, the poems written during the seventies and eighties, evinces an 'intense need' (as he put it in 'Salvaged'), on the poet's part, 'To come to terms' with both his native landscape and his life in the light of what has happened to him since he formulated his personal faith. 'Salvaged' (*A Different Drummer*) finds Clemo returning to an earlier line of approach, that employed in 'Goonvean Clay-work Farm'. Having watched in childhood and youth his grandfather's farm being 'eaten away' by the encroaching clay fields, 'Till not a post or grass-clump was left behind' he speculates such an experience may have traumatized him:

Did I fear to love the sown soil, the blushing cluster,  
Because I knew the white monster was potent,  
Sure to obliterate beauty and make me suffer?

We have here an explanation, perhaps as good as any, for the route Clemo's faith has taken. As with 'Tregargus', so here, one can understand the clayland images as metaphors for Clemo's fearful blood-line. But it is also possible in this poem, as it was not in 'Tregargus', to read 'the white monster' as a metaphor for God, much as Clemo had in, for example, 'Clay-land Moods' in *The Map of Clay*. Indeed, the poem seems to push us with increasing certainty in this direction:

...the land's peace can deceive, seduce,  
That thunder and flash and devastation  
May mean that heaven is working on a soul,  
Shifting the deep fixations, intending kindness.

One is even led here, it seems, back to 'Christ in the Clay-pit', where a younger Clemo had cried:

"Keep far from me all loveliness, O God,  
And let me laud thy meaner moods..."

'Private Pompeii' similarly returns the poet to his old haunts - the crumbling traces of his grandparents' farm, the huge kiln where his father had worked. But this time neither relic serves as an omen, and the poem concludes:

But in my depths, even if mist clung  
Around in ruins, I was aware  
That my Pompeii fable would be outgrown -  
Vesuvius, scorched bed, crushed roof and garden  
Become a mere traveller's tale at my fate's turn,  
And a sweet-stringed, post-pagan ardour be housed and born.

The poem denies that which 'Salvaged' affirmed.

'A Taste of Scilly' reaches back into a rare youthful holiday experience in order to assert that his 'unbandaged youth years' were 'not all hermit-waste, not all a scowl of mine-stacks' and that 'Soft loveliness also fed the artist'. He remembers:

Efficient waitresses.....  
Their mermaid hair loose, tossed over their backs,  
Their faces stark, moulded by a remote tidal mystery,  
I sensed the depth, the peace, the invincible isolation -  
Perhaps defensive, akin to mine;  
The invading values rang false to them and me,

Poems such as these show Clemo struggling to understand the events which have composed his life, from its earliest recollections through to the



present moment. He seeks a thread, a common point of reference. It is there, in fact, in the landscape itself as his repeated use of it testifies. But his native landscape has already been cast in its mould, and Clemo is too entangled with its historical and biographical connotations, it seems, consistently to impose a new, coherent, personal map upon it. The clayland speaks better of his past, despite the ingenuity of new renderings of it as in 'Tregargus', than he can make it do of his present.

In 1984 Clemo moved to Weymouth. He has yet to return to Cornwall. This change of abode itself needed to be made sense of, incorporated into an emerging pattern. This moment is recorded in 'Chesil Beach', the first poem Clemo wrote outside his native Cornwall.<sup>(1)</sup> It is also the poem in which Clemo found for the first time, in the geology of his wife's home area, the natural forms for a new poetry of grace. Standing on Chesil Beach, a year before he moved to Weymouth, the poet says:

I am no foreigner here  
If one can judge by an atmosphere,  
This is my birth-image -freak and chaos,  
A stammer of stone where custom called for sand...

Such a 'breach of geological rules' fitted his own search for 'the rare pattern, the fantastic stress'. Walking away from the Isle of Slings, where the Clemos had attended a prisoners' concert, the poet feels his affinity with them: 'Freak and chaos/ Were the criminals' heritage and mine', he says, but Clemo, faith confirmed, is free to:

.....taste human love's vivacity  
And innocently scramble  
From primeval pebbles to the brisk normal road,

Expressed here is the idea that, in the geology of Weymouth there is both a

1, Letter to the author.

repetition and a completion of the pattern of Clemo's life. Other poems, 'Weymouth', 'Sandsfoot Castle Gardens', would seem to support such an interpretation.

It is unlikely Clemo will ever return to Cornwall, even as a visitor. It has nothing further to offer him. While he is likely for some time to come to 'recall white crystals and the red/ Fanatic tinge on humped hills' ('Sandsfoot Castle Gardens'), a 'debauch of nostalgia', as he put it in 'Mappowder Revisted', is not for him. In the geology of the Isle of Slings he has found a more appropriate landscape: a geology which, as had the clay quarries of St Austell in their time, allows him to:

...celebrate

The awesome cacophony of a twisted islet

in recognition that he too 'sprang...from an odd, constricted race,' and thus do justice to his origins. But it is a place the very atmosphere of which Clemo finds speaks of 'release and rescue'. It is also a place the very name of which speaks of unremarkable normality - the truth to which artist and visionary must always return. It is likely to be about this area of England that Clemo will draw his final, definitive maps of grace.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN ;  
AGAINST THE TIDE

Marriage, as 'Royal Wedding' makes clear, gave Clemo a sense of having a stake in a history and tradition apart from, and in contrast to, what he saw as his Cornish-French heritage. With this new found sense of security Clemo was able, as he notes in 'Broad Autumn', to enjoy an 'expanding mental range'. The breadth of reference material employed, the variety of topographies, is evidence enough of this. But the 'culture' to which he came to feel he belonged was nonetheless a minority one, of little account in society's eyes, surviving on the periphery of the main-stream. And while Clemo, for the most part, is prepared to act as a poetic historian for that tradition and culture, and thus help to keep it alive, he is not afraid either to launch the occasional attacks upon the assumptions and values of a society he considers materialistic, shallow and egocentric.

In 'Poem at Sixty' (*A Different Drummer*), it is the poetic world which comes under attack. He had thrown a broad-side at this world in the final verse of 'A Couple at Fowey' where he described himself as:

A poet without nostalgia, without the negative  
Kindling of transience and despondency.

These negative attributions Clemo applies virtually to all other poets, and by extension to the arts generally. His condemnation in 'Poem at Sixty' of 'Romantic sentiment' should not be seen, then, as directed against a clearly identifiable school of poets, or style of poetry: even though the first and final stanzas name poets who are normally associated with Romanticism. Behind this specific identification, and controlling its meaning in the poem, lies Clemo's broader understanding of creativity which we have already explored in Chapters Six and Twelve. In the third stanza he denigrates poets of 'academic precision' also - a characteristic not

commonly ascribed to Romanticism. When Clemo names poets, as he does, in the opening lines of 'Poem at Sixty', the reader needs to have Clemo's broader, theologically orientated, concept in mind. Romantic poets, properly defined, offer themselves as exempla of characteristics which have wider distribution.

'Poem at Sixty' opens with a rare, well balanced epigrammatic couplet. (1)

So many poets, before they reached three-score,  
Let their despair employ a coroner.

This 'Augustan' voice does not serve, however, to establish a contrast between Romanticism and neo-classicism. The poem very quickly moves into a subjective, individualistic, indeed ego-centric, preoccupation with the self of the poet, which reveals, rather than it does suppress, the poet's actual 'romantic' inclination.

Having indicated a relationship between creativity and self-destruction, Clemo presents the reader with a role call by way of empirical evidence: 'Chatterton, Beddoes, Davidson, Mew/ Hart Crane, Vachel Lindsay...' The three dots are very expressive here for any one with a knowledge of poetry: one is almost invited to extend the list as far as one can. It is at this point that Clemo moves to the central thesis of the poem: why have so many poets killed themselves who have lived under circumstances no more trying than Clemo's own. (2) There is, perhaps, a hint of mock humility when Clemo raises this:

1. One of the few other examples is the opening lines of 'Shattered' (*Cactus on Carmel*).
2. Clemo's poetry has begun to reveal a fascination, on the poet's part, with his survival. It is a facet of 'A Nanpean Student', and an important part of 'Bedruthan', 'The Rift', 'Wessex and Lyonesse', 'Mappowder Revisted' and 'Unearthed'. This may be no more than a corollary of advancing years. His survival - in terms of mental balance and morale rather than physical health - against appalling odds is attributed by him to the nature of his faith and its influence upon his creativity; the subject of the poem under discussion.



...I think my stars  
Were as tragic as theirs, yet my pen  
Still throws up clues to my survival,  
A massed chorus with no broken bars,

At first it seems Clemo is to offer the by now familiar answer: the uncompromising nature of the geography of the St Austell area; a district which is 'Hardly Cornish at all', as he puts it in this poem. But this time Clemo has added a further refinement. That land having been unsung by any previous poets, Clemo could not be contaminated by predecessors:

Nowhere between Land's End and Tamar  
Had a pen-stroke left a mark that guided my steps  
Or cut a kindred passage,

The River Tamar marks the boundary between Cornwall and Devon just beyond Launceston, and Clemo therefore invokes the entire domain of Cornwall. He is not attempting to deny here the existence of other Cornish writers - with some, like Causley, he was well-acquainted - but rather the uniqueness, within a domain so generally attractive to the artistic, of his own particular quarter, and its virgin stature so far as poetry goes. Beyond the Tamar he would have in mind T.F.Powys, Hardy and, further yet to the east, Tennyson (whom he named in 'Royal Wedding' as part of the tradition to which Clemo now sees himself belonging). Given, he says, the uniqueness of such a locality - briefly summarized in stanza three - 'What could [the aims and aspirations of other poets]...mean to me?'

Environment, he implies, forced him to reject as irrelevant:

Romantic sentiment - squires and halls,  
Prudent ideals, academic precision -

Against this indulgent, sentimentalized view of Cornwall - he may have had in mind writers like Daphne du Maurier with whom he had clashed in the *Cornish Guardian* in 1934, A.L. Rowse, and Silas and Joseph Hocking(1)...against these Clemo sets his Primitivism, a fierce cocktail of Alfred Wallis, Billy Bray, social isolation, Calvinist theology and 'the sex-mystic's pulse of moon-tokens...' This heady mixture, he asserts, which was:

Louder than the sea that silenced Davidson,  
Stronger than the poison that ended Lindsay's twang,

and which he goes on to name 'the old Damascus twang', (almost as it were, indeed, a cocktail) brought him 'balance'.

'Poem at Sixty', while quite different in style from 'Outsider' (*Cactus on Carmel*) - they are separated by some twenty years: the latter having originally been cast in April 1960 as 'Lines to the Blind'(2) and recast five years later - is in full agreement with that earlier poem in terms of the privileging of Primitivism over Romanticism, Classicism and Academicism in the arts. Recast during Clemo's relationship with Mary Wiseman, 'Outsider' fails to distinguish between the urbane ('so civilized'), the technically proficient ('So dextrous in control'), and the Romantic ('who find your victory/ In affliction's craft and trade.') Clemo is 'outside' all of these:

...a truant soul,  
Deep in the Word, stung by the dirt  
Of primal clues which you disdain,

1. See for example his comments on the refusal of the Hockings to write about the district of Cornwall they had known in their childhoods, Clemo's own area. Instead, Clemo says, 'they turned away to the fashionable world' of Cornwall, 'The Hocking Brothers', *The Cornish Review*, op.cit.

2. 'Lines to the Blind', *Outposts*, Winter, 1961; uncollected.



Clemo's assault upon the literary-artistic world is, of course, also the concern - with varying degrees of explicitness - of the portraits and dramatic monologues which take such persons as their subjects.

But it is not just, nor was it ever only, with what Clemo considers to be artistic error that he is concerned. In 'Service to England' (*Cactus on Carmel*) Clemo returns to a consideration of what constitutes a proper patriotism for a Christian: returns to because he had, in almost identical terms, raised this issue in his letters to the press between 1940 and 1943. The poem opens with a rhetorical flourish as he asks: 'What have I done for this nation?' His first answer is, indeed, in terms of his war-time activities:

I have wandered past its crossroads  
When the signposts were stripped for fear of invasion...

His contribution was, he says, a spiritual one:

And I mourned chiefly that the blunt text  
Had been unhinged from the pulpit stumps,  
That millions at their crossroads had no guiding finger.

Realising this, he says, his 'brain turned black with a rage of loyalty', and his pen 'blazed at usurping codes' - a reference perhaps to *Wilding Graft* which argued the hopelessness of socialist-materialist values at the very time that Britain was preparing to elect a Labour government with an over-all majority for the first time. The 'victory flare' meant nothing for him, he says, because he was more concerned with 'the tender conquest'. In a powerful and telling line Clemo defines the distance which separated him from his contemporaries - he had 'feared the cold glance more than the bomb.'

The refusal to allow material considerations, even the threat of war-time destruction, to overtake spiritual ones, is the subject also of

'William Blake Notes a Demonstration' (*The Echoing Tip*). A dramatic monologue, Clemo interweaves Blake's temperament and preoccupations with his own. The blurring of time this requires is achieved through the device of Blake having a vision, not, this time, of Beulah or Heaven and Hell, but of London in the second half of the twentieth century. Homeward bound, Blake suddenly sees 'the red scroll darkening'. He has, Blake says, already 'been plagued enough by Newton' but now foresees a world run by experts and intellectuals of every kind. Blake's longed for Jerusalem is beheld inhabited by 'harlots.../ In street, school and pulpit'.

In this blurry vision Clemo has Blake make out the shape of a marching procession, campaigning against nuclear weapons. 'Heaven's scroll', Blake wryly remarks, 'mocks such peace-planners.'

If men can't die praising God  
They're not ripe for life, not fit  
To protest against the means of exit,

To Blake's mind the major offence of these well-intentioned marchers is to add to the general sum of material fears. And this encourages a loss of faith in a God prepared to intervene in human affairs. Global destruction, Blake asserts, is not in man's power for all his weapons.

The angels that thronged my garden tree  
Will guard the - what's the jargon? - missile-sites,  
And the red scroll's horrors won't cremate the West  
Till those angels and their cohorts quit  
And the undamned Judgment smites,

The poem does recognise a real danger of destruction, however. But this does not come from the international amassing of nuclear bombs so much as it does through the continuing decline of 'prodigals' (like Clemo himself as an adolescent toying with 'idealism' and 'paganism') 'plodding home' -



that is, returning to the true faith through recognition of the superior importance of a spiritual realm under God's governance.

'William Blake Notes a Demonstration' is perhaps one of Clemo's most disturbing poems, even for those prepared to extend their sympathies generously on his behalf. His appropriation of Blake (long a hero of the literary 'left' (1)) as a defender of right wing policy is probably of small account compared with the crude apologia Clemo offers for those policies themselves: (2) an attitude towards nuclear destruction that finds support amongst the right-wing 'Born Again' Churches of North America. Yet, not only is this poem consistent with early published remarks (the war-time letters), it is completely consistent with the conception of a spiritually motivated universe which occupies a prominent place throughout Clemo's writing, in poetry and prose alike. It may not even be so far off line with respect to its appropriation of Blake. For Blake may be interpreted as having come to believe - subsequent to the French revolution - that internal, spiritual revolution had to precede political revolution if the latter were to genuinely offer the prospect of redemption from humanity's ills. (3) This may be understood to be the subject of Blake's last and probably greatest illuminated book, *Jerusalem, the Emanation of the Giant Albion*. And Clemo's poem, like Blake's, fears destruction because, as Blake put it in *Jerusalem*, 'Emanations/ Are weak, they know not whence they are nor whither they tend.'

This political perspective is encountered again in the next collection, *Broad Autumn*. In 'The Harassed Preacher' Clemo employs the, for him, most unusual device of a fictitious persona: the only other example of this is 'The Clay-tip Worker' in *The Clay Verge*. On this occasion the persona is that of a Cornish preacher, who reflects on his way to chapel the rising loss of faith which he attributes to the 'bomb and gun', 'the analyst' and

1. His name is frequently invoked by poets like Allen Ginsberg and Adrian Mitchell.

2. I am reminded here of Heller's point, specifically directed at Rilke, but meant for general application; 'I am concerned' Heller writes, 'with a dangerous type of fallacy; that Rilke's ideas do not matter because they are a poet's ideas'; Eric Heller, *The Disinherited Mind*, London, 4th ed, 1975, p.154.

3. John Beer, op.cit., Chapter Seven.

a 'new age' where material comforts are uppermost in people's minds. In the old days, he muses, the seats of the chapels 'were rough and bare benches' and there was not a organ to accompany the hymns and yet in the

...grit-ringed nook those drab lives took  
Fresh shape in Wesley's air,

The preacher forces these disquieting thoughts aside: he has his congregation and will serve them to his best:

A plague on heckling voices  
That would check my sermon's flight!  
It's eleven o'clock and here's my flock -  
Five villagers, old and bright,  
Knowing their faith is right,

'The Harassed Preacher', it will be seen from the last stanza, takes its inspiration from Browning's 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day'.<sup>(1)</sup> It is perhaps the only poem in which Clemo can be said to owe a strong debt to Browning in terms of verse form, subject and poetic voice. 'The Harassed Preacher' certainly captures the bouyant optimism of the end of 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day', and of many other Browning poems.

'Whispers', also in *Broad Autumn*, is a more reflective poem; and one that combines Clemo's objections to the materialism and trivialisation of our age with an sustained attempt to argue out the basis for belief. Sheer boredom in the face of such an age could not, the poet says, 'evoke such clear intimations' of a spiritual perspective such as he has. That would produce only 'the screwed frost of silence'. Clemo then produces a catalogue of contemporary society. He has, he says:

...trudged the menaced and changeful way  
Down through the twentieth century,

1. Browning, *The Poetical Works*..., op.cit., vol.1.



Smelt petrol, drugs and bleaching chemicals,  
Passed super-markets, laboratories, clinics,  
...[He has]...heard men's voices barking on the moon,  
Bomb-clouts and the shrieked pop tune...

and on through what 'today's paper claims/ For the birth pill', liberal theologians and 'young trendy poets', who write about 'urinals'; and, of course, the materialist explanations of religion and sex.

Against all this Clemo sets his 'whispers', the 'intimations' that come, he feels, from a future age when the world will step into 'faith-flushed terrain again'. Of the terrible fears which beset an age suffering threat of catastrophe by action or inaction alike, Clemo says:

...terror is truth in the intermediate  
Regions between nullity and centre,

The poem in which Clemo most firmly establishes his difference from the age is, without doubt, 'A Young Mystic'. This poem, in two parts, has Clemo speak as himself: in part one as he was at seventeen, and in part two at twenty four years of age. The voice, however, is assuredly that of the mature Clemo, and with a fine line in very dry humour here. The poem opens:

All very well for the gregarious Donne  
To see mankind as solid, unified,  
A mainland knocked by a common tide...

Against this image of a continental land mass Clemo sets his own: not contrary but supplementary, the meteor which lands upon a continent from outer space. 'Rare souls' he says, 'rise from rock-cells blown/ From meteors, falling, far out...' The meteor has been an important, although little used, metaphor throughout Clemo's career. We first met it in

*The Shadowed Bed* where it represented God's grace as materially present in the world and at the same time wholly alien from it. It was used in this way in 'Meteorite' in the *Frontier Signals* section of *The Map of Clay*. In 'A Young Mystic' he is now a flake of that meteorite, and those like him are 'solitaries, / Twisted spikes that snarl or shine alone'. For such as he the phrase 'my fellow men' is 'meaningless', so far outside the normal run of activities and interests is he:

I cannot be the norm, the human being  
Fretted by fear of bombs or of the sack,  
Vivid with friends, agreeing or disagreeing,  
Thrilled with pride to see the Union Jack,

There are, he says, for such as he no loyalties 'Beyond the primal bonds of God and sex':

And these are so formed in me, so meteor-flaked,  
That no-one on the mainland, no-one  
On the trading decks, would guess  
What I mean by the Name, what I seek in a kiss,

Section two of the poem tells what ended the 'quarrel': it was 'the unique Rock', that is, Christian faith. Clemo here places faith alone as the source of his salvation - not spoken of here in terms of salvation from sin but, rather, salvation from social isolation. The poem, concerned only with his early life, does not go on to talk of sexual love, except in symbols of Christ's Bride.

'A Young Mystic' is powerfully written and deals at length with his isolated youth: it has much less to say in section two, which leads one to suspect that the poet's identification is still more with the outsider, the 'meteor-flakes', than the 'common tide'. An interpretation the rest of Clemo's work supports, even when one takes into account the poet's sense of belonging to a historically given and contemporarily living tradition.



Clemo's opposition to materialism is itself, as he realised in 'The Frosted Image', materialist: that is, the spiritual dimension he privileges is dependent upon adverse material conditions. Such conditions for the most part are the 'bud of gunman and whore', that is, the source of moral degeneracy. But, once in a while, rather than 'vermin and cynical snails', it is a 'true vision' which 'flowers undaunted/ By rats' reek and sodden paper'. Such a vision, which Clemo calls here 'the saint's view', is all too rare, he laments. Material achievements, 'men circle...high to bestride/ Dead space where open breath is denied' appear to most people to be more glamorous. But it is at this point in the poem that Clemo abruptly turns the materialist argument upon itself. The cue for this is the line just quoted, with its reference to 'dead space' and the inability to breathe there. The science and technology which have gone into enabling men to live in cramped, stuffy environments in space have, when looked at materialistically, produced nothing more than a cruel mockery of the cramped prison of planet earth above which they circle:

Science shedding an astral glamour  
That mocks the clammy sore, the laggard place  
Where design and breeding breath lack space,

*A Different Drummer* contains, as we have noted, only one poem of the kind discussed in this chapter. Never more than a minor chord, it is curious that *Broad Autumn* should have contained four such poems which, rather than extol the virtues of an obscure elect or illustrate the futility behind the apparent achievements valued by a materialist world, take the argument to mainstream society in varying ways and challenge its values head on. Perhaps we are unlikely to see many more of them in the future. And yet, poems like 'The Frosted Image' and 'Whispers' do offer Clemo an alternative means to pursue his case after the completion of his biographical studies. At seventy two years of age, and still productive, he has the talent, and hopefully the time, to do so.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN  
THE VIRGIN PAGE

In 1978 Jack Clemo kindly provided me with access to over one hundred and twenty poems in manuscript form and to the entirety of his prose work that had survived in typed and handwritten format. The latter has already been made use of in Chapter Four. This chapter will concentrate upon the poetry manuscripts, from the earliest post-war work to material that was not collected until 1986.(1) It covers therefore the emergence of his mature poetic vein immediately following the Second World War, the onset of blindness in the mid fifties and the stylistic changes initiated during the mid sixties, and allows for an effective study of longer term trends not necessarily evident in the published work.

In *Confession of a Rebel* Clemo provided an account of the writing of 'Christ in the Clay-pit', his first mature poem. Of that poem he said:

...early in February, 1945, I came in from a stroll around  
Goonvean clay-work one Sunday afternoon and immediately wrote,  
quite effortlessly, some lines which I knew at once were the finest  
poetry I had ever penned,(2)

Three things are implicated here: the role of inspiration, the ease with which the poem followed on from its inspiration, and an indication that the inspired lines needed no subsequent alteration. Approximately half the poems written during the following six years conform to this. A long unpublished satirical poem, 'The Conspirators', suffered minimal revision to less than half a dozen lines. 'Meteorite' saw its last three lines rearranged, while 'Neutral Ground' (both published in *The Map of Clay*)

1. A representative sample of Clemo's manuscript material was lodged at the Library of Exeter University in 1981. This has yet to be catalogued. 2. *Confession*, p.221.



required only slight alteration to one line. The ability to conceive a poem in its entirety has not diminished with the years. 'Mary Shelley in Geneva' and 'In Contrast' (*The Echoing Tip*) are almost unblotted.

Numerous manuscripts testify to the suddenness of inspiration and the poet's need to put pen to paper immediately. 'The Water Wheel' is one of many poems penned on the blank side of a sheet of paper torn from a novel manuscript, while 'Sufficiency' was composed on the reverse of a receipt. Blindness has forced more order into the creative process. Since 1960 all Clemo's poetry has been composed in a series of small lined notebooks, which were, until his removal to Weymouth, stored, most recent uppermost, in a drawer of his writing desk.

Inspiration is a fickle creature, and in common with other poets, Clemo has often found himself deserted by her part way through a poem's composition. 'Sufficiency' is a good example of this. The poem's opening lines appear penned in haste, and suffered little subsequent amendment. Its central patterning of binary opposites - grass and gravel, flower and rope, etc. - required some careful organizing, but the poem's last twelve lines demanded four days of attention. 'Clay-land Moods' also proved difficult. Manuscript copy gave way to typed copy, which itself endured considerable defacement. The nature of the alterations show that Clemo was always aware of what he wished to say, and throughout the various correcting stages theme, mood, rhythm and even imagery, if broadly considered, remained constant. But something told the poet that it was not quite right, yet. As W.H. Auden has said, the poem is there 'waiting to be identified like a telephone number one cannot remember'. (1)

There is a sense, also, of the poet stumbling by associational word play far beyond his final designation and having to haul the poem back again. In 'Clay-land Moods' for example we find first of all the introduction of the idea of the Sphinx. This encourages subsequent expansion and the line:

1. W.H. Auden, 'Squares and Oblongs', in *Poets at Work*, ed. Charles D. Abbott, New York, 1948.

Quiet Egyptian cruelty of the watching eyes

'Egyptian', and presumably 'Sphinx', reminds Clemo of entombed mummies, and prompts the phrase 'the tombs of barren trust'. Another revision session saw the Sphinx related imagery struck out, but its replacement owes a debt to the effaced lines. In this case the two lines above became:

Quiet veiled cruelty of the watching eyes

and

the moors of barren trust

Curiously, quite opposed images and phrases may be interchangeable. 'Clay-land Moods' sees the lines:

...no peak of vision

Remains for me, no manly decision

converted to:

...peaks of vision seethe

With hostile potency

Clearly context rules the reading of individual components.

Initial overstatement is frequently a fault requiring subsequent correction. 'Cornish Anchorite' originally contained several lines that needed to be toned down considerably; lines which distractingly introduced the idea of the death of God, and with death a series of images of putrefaction. These were finally disciplined to:

Now deep in the clay-land winter lies my brain



Here again we find reversal of initial possibilities resolves local difficulties, so that eventually God's death becomes 'a truth the ironic Word has sown'.

Inspiration has often proved for Clemo to be non-specific, a single incident stimulating two poems (as in the case of the published 'A Calvinist in Love' and the unpublished 'The Rebels', written on consecutive days), while in one week in September 1946 Clemo wrote five poems, three inspired by a single event and the other two apparently the result of surplus creative energy. Such periods could prove enormously creative: in one month Clemo wrote seven poems and revised two others. Clemo is still liable to these intensely creative bursts of energy. During a six week period of 1973 he wrote five poems, a sixth of the collection *Broad Autumn* in which they appeared.

Ten typed pages at the end of a post-war folio reveal two other aspects of Clemo's working habits. In their original form these pages constituted one long poem concerned with creativity and faith. The poem proved unmanageable, but out of its vast bulk Clemo carved six separate poems. The other discovery is the more surprising. Twenty five lines of the original poem made their way into 'Charlotte Nicholls', a poem not written until fifteen years after the original manuscript had been abandoned and ten years after Clemo endured his last and permanent attack of blindness. Some lines have been altered, for example:

The tumbled gaucheries of a platitude

appears in the 1966 version as:

the friendly echo of a platitude (1)

In the 1950 manuscript Clemo had written:

1, Another example where two opposite meanings serve an identical function,

And we, the complex, the original, must bear  
The pang of knowing that our share  
In His redemptive plan is least,  
Most potent,  
Because most rich in alien potency.

Sixteen years on only the last line appears altered in its first appearance: the final version is considerably changed.

Clemo has said that he quickly forgets poems.(1). Yet, 'Charlotte Nicholls' is not exceptional. The poem 'Laika' was originally composed in 1960 and appeared the following year in *Unicorn*. It also exists in manuscript form dated 1969.(2) There are substantial differences between the 1960 published version and the 1969 manuscript version but the similarity is remarkable. A revision of the 1969 draft version even restores a line from the published poem omitted in the first of the 1969 drafts. It is as though he had subsequently remembered yet another line. 'The Brownings at Vallombrosa', written in 1969, employs three stanzas from a 1946 redraft of the 1946 poem 'The Rebels'. Twenty three years separate the duplication of the verses. Yet in 1969 they were written without hesitation or correction. In Chapter Five we noted that Clemo had recalled a character and its actions from an unpublished novel in order to produce a short story some twenty five years after the novel had been put aside.

One can speak with such confidence about Clemo's manuscript poems because of the compositional method blindness has imposed upon the poet. Separate from the difficulties visual deprivation created, was the adjustment from a haphazard draft procedure on the first available paper surface. Where inspiration failed him a mass of deletions, corrections, reconsiderations would sprawl across the page, requiring later a very careful visual discrimination, especially as Clemo sometimes did not cross out altered lines and would happily marginate several alternatives for

1, See 'A Vocation for Marriage', *Sunday Observer Supplement*, 17/2/1980.

2, The discrepancy cannot be due to incorrect dating on the 1969 manuscript, as, has already been intimated, Clemo, since his blindness has worked methodically through bound-leaf notebooks,



later selection. Blindness made such a method quite impossible. Yet he stubbornly refused to learn Braille for nearly ten years, and even after he had learnt to finger-read he never acquired a Braille typewriter. The difficulty he encountered in using his mother as amanuensis, while completing *The Invading Gospel*, convinced him not to rely upon assistance again. And, since the mid-fifties, he has worked unaided.<sup>(1)</sup> Adjustment proved difficult, with scarcely a poem written for five years. And yet, remarkably, the new procedure employed remained in many ways close to his old habits. Indeed, a reader of a draft poem unacquainted with the facts of Clemo's handicaps would assume that Clemo, like Joyce, was chronically short-sighted rather than blind. Clemo, of course, is unable to read what he writes.

Clemon, then, still composes by hand, and in the child-like print he had adopted as his sight worsened.. And while they are substantially reduced, marginalia, deletions and insertions still occur. For the student of manuscript material, however, such emendations have an additional significance in Clemon's case. For Clemon cannot return to a written line, with any guarantee of locating it accurately, after he has passed it. A deletion, correction, insertion indicates an *immediate* alteration. On the other hand, an entry at the bottom of a page, as for example the phrase 'After the questing saga of flight' (from the manuscript of 'Summer Saga') indicates later rethinking.

1. This requires some qualification. All Clemon's poetry, since 1953 has been written without assistance of any kind. This is not true of his prose, *The Marriage of a Rebel* was produced with considerable assistance from his wife Ruth. She read the chapters as he produced them, pointed out errors, inconsistencies and repetitions. Even so, her help was considerably less than that provided by many editors. The writing of this book had been probably been eased by the fact that for many years Clemon had been answering questions from readers of his poetry eager for further information on his life. This is acknowledged indirectly in the Preface. As a consequence the autobiographical work, when he finally attempted it, 'just flowed out...'; letter to the author. Ruth read the typescript of *The Shadowed Bed* and suggested some half a dozen alterations to sentences which struck her as clumsy or confusing. Apart from this, the text remained unchanged from its second typed version.



Marginalia, on the other hand, indicates parallel or forward thinking. The first draft of 'Summer Saga' has a series of separate words in the right hand margin which were incorporated into a later stanza. 'Grasmere Reflections', 'Bedruthan' and 'Eros in Exile' (amongst many others) exhibit the same phenomenon. Marginalia do not always find their way into the finished poem, subsequent reflection may deem the original better. The manuscript of 'Cactus' demonstrates a further possibility. The draft of this poem had the word 'blight' in the right hand margin of the first verse. It serves no purpose, and does not occur in subsequent revisions. The original opening stanza to which 'blight' had been attached, underwent substantial revision including an additional rhyme-pair 'night/light'. The marginalised word served to give notice to the poet that such a rhymed pair was needed.

Footnotes have increased continually over the years: they do not appear at all in manuscripts written before Clemo's blindness. Beneath the drafted lines of 'Alfred Wallis', written in May 1968, Clemo recorded the following fragments:

That tore.....the lines fire  
mouldy room  
I wonder if theres...outlawed  
timbrels

From this cluster of brief notes Clemo was able to generate a new fifth line for stanza one; 'That tore my fingers, cramped the line's fire', an addition to the poem's opening line, an improved visual image for the second stanza, and half of the sixth stanza. Without, of course, being able to read the notes. In other poems the destination is given. 'Wamba Convent', for example, has eight footnote revisions, six of which are numbered '3,4,1,2,3,4'. Other revisions are even more clearly designated. A footnote to 'The Islets' is prefaced '2nd line'. Nine further lines of revision receive no such indication.

The itemizing of footnotes is an increasing trend, with greater



specificity an accompanying characteristic. An example of this is found in 'I Go Gentle'. It reads:

;

2nd verse; change order; Bedford Lourdes

A substantial process of revision after the original drafting is often indicated by the word 'Revision', sometimes in parenthesis, atop the relevant lines. Sometimes a line is drawn at the conclusion of a session. In both cases the words, phrases, lines that are found beneath are clearly the result of later reflection.

Blindness has not reduced the total amount of written revisions which may be necessary before Clemo is satisfied. As the example given above illustrates, Clemo remains concerned about matters which even a sensitive reader would probably not notice. The poem 'Eric Gill' proved very difficult. After several stages of revision Clemo, one imagines with relief, wrote 'End'. But later drew a line and hastily noted 'revision of revision' and worked on for a further one and a half pages. Often these revision notes are not incorporated into a subsequent draft, finding their way directly onto the typed version.

But the question that remains unanswered is: Why does Clemo draft long hand at all? And why does he leave himself instructions ('change order', 'replace with') that he cannot read either? Corrections, marginalia and footnotes are all obliterated to him by the white fog of his blindness. The only conceivable purpose writing can have is to slow down the process of composition thereby allowing increased time for mental retention: it is Clemo who types the final version. I sought confirmation from Clemo on this point and received the following reply: 'You are right in your assumption that I shape the poems in my head, then write the complete poem rapidly to stamp it clearly on my mind. I then wait a few hours or several days, jotting down amendments'. (1) Clemo's account, while confirming the retention hypothesis, provides a version of composition which is simplified compared with the story the manuscripts tell. It is not the case that

1, Letter to the author.



drafts are written, as it were, cleanly from memory. The positional corrections certainly do indicate either momentary lapses of concentration, or sudden and minor changes of vocabulary consonant with a process of continuous 'dictation'. The use of footnotes accords with Clemo's account of later reflection; but the marginalia provide evidence of compositional difficulties, doubts and indecisions at the time of writing which cannot be immediately resolved. The worksheets for 'Wedding Eve' record eighty alterations, some minor, others entire lines. Together they trace the slow and difficult evolution of the poem *on the page*. And what is true of this poem is true also for many others: the worksheet alterations are a vital part of the creative process and contribute to the eradication of the prosaic, to greater precision of imagery, acoustics, rhyme, distancing, and rhythm. Handwriting apart, there is nothing which distinguishes Clemo's worksheets from those of sighted poets.

Having said this it is nonetheless true that the process of writing does enable the lines to be 'stamped upon the poet's mind', and to quite a remarkable degree. Of the original fortysix lines of the manuscript of 'Virginia Woolf', twentythree lines suffered revisions, and many of these were substantial and complex. A poem may lie incomplete for some time. 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer' was first jotted down on the 29 December, 1976, and underwent revision shortly after. Clemo then wrote, with attendant revisions, two more poems before returning to the Bonhoeffer poem. A month separates the poem's initial and final stages.

The survival of these manuscripts enables the student of Clemo's poetry to trace the struggle for a more objective style initiated by Mary Wiseman. The necessary distancing was often achieved through conversion of first person to third. This is evident in, amongst other poems, 'Grasmere Reflections', where the change encourages other alterations.

First draft: I, squatting on my clay-caulked battle deck,  
Absorb the seafaring cow, the horned dilemma



Published version: He, rambling his flower-caulked battle-deck,  
Absorbs the seafaring herd, the horned grey raiders

The amended version alludes to William Wordsworth and thus helps to ensure appropriateness of imagery throughout the rest of the poem.

'Summer Saga' was written following tragic news. (1) The last five lines of the published second stanza read:

In its crazed vortex, her child's cries  
Pierce the dried memory  
Of her flight from this fluttering cone  
When a summer's promise turned  
To dust-swarms, maggots on the bone,

Originally these lines had read:

In the mad vortex her child cries  
To the (\_\_\_\_) memory  
Of a flight from the fluttering cone  
When she left me to the maggots on the bone,

An interim revision resorted to the third person in order to erase the poem's subjective orientation:

When she left her summer lover  
To dust swarms, maggots on the bone,

The final version has only three eighths of the original number of personal pronouns.

We have already noted that Mary Wiseman assisted Clemo during the years of their romance. It was she who was responsible for the historical

1, Clemo only hints at the matter in *Marriage*, p.123. One of the children of 'T' had been struck down with blindness; information given to the author.

presentation found in 'Bunyan's Daughter'. Originally, it had been a moral attack on prostitution. Mary insisted it 'needed a concrete historical focus'.<sup>(1)</sup> The historicizing of themes, through portraiture and dramatic monologue, were to prove invaluable in weaning Clemo's art from its absorbing interest in himself; in addition to providing a writer so deprived of sensory stimuli with promising material. At first it proved difficult to erase himself from these poems, as, for example, 'Massabeille' shows by its original opening lines:

I have no tribute to spare

For Haworth or Springfield whose mysteries shed their (\_\_\_\_) minds...

Which only later became:

No Lourdes-golden flare

Lit Haworth or Springfield, where mystic minds...

Six years later he still had to work hard at self-effacement, as is evident in 'Beethoven', and 'William Blake Notes a Demonstration'. Both poems, in their early stages, were marred by the unnecessary drawing of parallels and the intrusive first person singular. By the middle seventies this difficulty had been overcome, with a clear separation drawn between poems invoking the subjectivity of the poet as necessary reference, and those more objective works that require the poet's skill but not his presence.

Reading the manuscripts, with their corrections, cryptic, and sometimes very detailed, reminders to the author is a strange experience. For one cannot help but remember constantly that these carefully preserved pages, like the published books that derive from them, inhabit a world to which their author has no access: except by a determination of mind resolute to remain faithful to the moments in which his unseeing hand moved across them.

1, Letter from Clemo to the author,







## APPENDIX TWO

### JAN.

1.—A number of interesting birds visit our coasts during the autumn and winter months; the Snow Bunting comes to the British Isles from the Arctic regions; other visitors are the Shore Lark, the Snowy Owl, the Brent Goose, the Teal, and the Pintail.

2.—There are flowers on the gorse to be found all the year round, and the golden blossoms are very welcome in the winter.

3.—In fine weather the yellowhammer begins to sing his quaint little song about "a little bit of bread and no cheese"; the chaffinch too, will soon begin to think of spring and nest-building and his call-notes, "Spink-pink!" will grow louder and more musical.

4.—During the winter bullfinches will often come into the garden; they come in pairs, for they mate for life; with them will be noticed greenfinches and, less frequently, goldfinches.

5.—One of the most interesting of our resident birds is the Barn Owl, and these cold months he captures and eats great numbers of mice and rats. Unfortunately, it is chiefly the harmless little field mice he gets, not the obnoxious house mice.

6.—When digging look out for the little shiny brown chrysalides of the common cabbage moth; they should all be ruthlessly destroyed.

7.—The harmless looking little grey Winter moth is on the wing and may be seen at dusk, when it will often find its way into the house; the fragile little caterpillars do immense damage to fruit trees.

8.—Nest boxes should be put up in good time for those birds—such as tits and robins—who are generally quite willing to build in or near our gardens; in feeding their young they destroy untold numbers of grubs and insects.

9.—The sticky brown buds on the horse-chestnuts will soon begin to swell and to look as if they had been varnished.

10.—Leaf-buds on the beech are very different from those on the horse-chestnuts; they are slender and pointed, and placed alternately on the twig; the tiny pale green leaves inside the bud are folded fan-wise.

11.—At the foot of the poplar trees will often be found, in the loose, leafy soil the dull brown pupae of the beautiful Poplar hawk-moths.

12.—Though the days are growing longer they often grow colder too, and about this time hard frosts often come.

13.—Many caterpillars live through the winter, but they are not easy to find; the most of the Swallowtail moth are, however, frequently detected on ivy and elder twigs.

14.—Many people confuse the plane and the sycamore; before the leaves come this spring notice the "buttons" on the plane; there are "keys" on the sycamore.

15.—Rabbits are often seen sitting outside their burrows on a sunny day.

16.—A very pretty moth, the Pale Brindled Beauty, is a common insect that flies this month; the female moth cannot fly.

17.—Weasels are sometimes so hungry in frosty weather that they will enter gardens in search of field mice.

18.—The loud, almost defiant song of the Storm Cock or Mistle thrush is heard from the tops of tall trees; he often, apparently, chooses wild, blustery weather in which to sing.

19.—Very few birds will eat the mistletoe berries, except the Mistle thrush, whose name was originally Mistletoe thrush.

20.—A few old heads of sunflowers, hung up in the garden, will attract numbers of birds.

21.—It is not easy to find and to see the stoat, but hard weather will sometimes bring him near the house; except in snowy weather in a very cold part of the country he does not completely change his coat.

22.—Another animal that is sometimes seen is a young fox cub; in his first year a fox is less shy than afterwards, and will boldly venture into farmyards.

23.—In sheltered districts the toad will sometimes venture out of his hiding-place towards the end of the month.

24.—The hedges are in some places just beginning to change colour; when the sun shines on them there is a faint and welcome purplish tinge on the bare twigs.

25.—In winter the alder may always be recognised by the empty, woody cones still hanging on the tree; there are none on the hazels.

26.—The larch has always a specially lifeless appearance at this time of the year; it is the only coniferous tree that is not evergreen.

27.—The glossy broad leaves, arrow-shaped, of the Cuckoo-pint or Wild Arum, are to be found now in hedges and woods.

28.—Sometimes the call-notes of the wood-pigeon or ring-dove are heard in the woods; they begin nesting very early in the spring.

29.—The common or Black Scoter and the Red-breasted Merganser should

be looked for on the coast; they are both fairly common winter visitors.

### FEB.

1.—Already there are the green blossoms of the dog's-mercury and the green hellebore in the woods, and in the garden there are snowdrops and gold and purple crocuses.

2.—Leaves are coming out on the honeysuckle, especially on those plants that grow wild in woods.

3.—The silver buds on the willow are growing very conspicuous.

4.—Green woodpeckers are always shy birds; but at this time of the year they may be caught sight of as they hunt for chrysalides and grubs amongst the trees; there is no more beautiful sight these grey days than one of these birds.

5.—On fine days the squirrel wakes and goes to one of his stores of nuts; he rarely goes to the same place twice, as he knows he might be tracked by some hungry weasel.

6.—The cheery, loud song of the wren will be heard from now onwards, though the bird itself is not so often seen.

7.—Pied wagtails come into the garden to be fed; they generally wait about till the other birds have gone.

8.—House flies are waking up and may often be seen on the window panes of warm, shut-up rooms.

9.—During the winter starlings do a great amount of good, eating numerous grubs and noxious insects; for this they should be forgiven for eating a small amount of fruit in the summertime.

10.—The truffle, the edible underground fungus, is found during the winter, up till this month; it is generally found under oaks and beeches.

11.—Flowers on the yew are maturing; the male blossoms, composed of yellow anthers surrounded by scales, will be found on a different tree from that on which the seed flowers grow.

12.—Chickweed and shepherd's-purse are in flower.

13.—Snails are sometimes tempted to break the wall of white mucus they have built up between themselves and the winter's cold and come forth for a stroll; generally, however, they meet an ever-watchful thrush.

14.—The first young leaves of the elder are beginning to appear.

15.—On bay trees may be noticed the very young flower buds.

16.—Flower buds are also to be seen on the blackthorn.



APPENDIX THREE

*[Faint handwritten text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. The text is mostly illegible due to fading and bleed-through.]*

APPENDIX FOUR

A Dip Room Dishes

(R 4184h)

V. 1, line 2 - pilgrim

V. 2, line 3 - Learning the stages  
of the step, how...

A pointed way ....  
The other a private.

8. The only sees the crowd ....

16. As a reaction while he, in conflict,  
Staring to the gay tempo, the unheard  
Rhythmic move, while he, in conflict...

V. 3, l. 6. Jugal Kumbhar, bath

V. 2. 10. Mythe his feet place together  
V. 2. 10. Swan of Chisom,



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